

The Spreading Depths: Lesbian and Bisexual Women in English Canada, 1910-1965

by

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We accept this dissertation as conforming  
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### ABSTRACT

Most women who desired women in the period 1910-1965 did not have the identity categories “lesbian” and “bisexual” available to them. Even in this linguistic vacuum, however, many were able to explore same-sex relationships, to engage in physical sexual activity with women, and even to form community on the basis of same-sex desire and behaviour. How were they able to understand themselves in relation to the homophobic world in which they lived?

This dissertation examines the lives of lesbians and bisexual women in English Canada between 1910 and 1965, focusing particularly on the formation of subjectivity in relation to same-sex desires, relationships with partners and families of origin, sexual practices, and community. An analysis of oral testimonies, of journals, and of love letters shows that particular life events—the first awareness of same-sex attraction, physical exploration of that attraction, the finding of a language with which to describe same-sex desires and relationships, the first important same-sex relationship, and the finding of community—served as turning points in the formation of subjectivity. The story of that journey was later expressed as a linear and essentialist “coming out” narrative in which the individual triumphed over homophobia and ignorance and discovered her true self. That narrative structure is both understandable in the context of essentialist definitions of sexual orientation and a politically necessary one, given the need for a single identity category under which to campaign for legal and social recognition.

The two dominant formulations of same-sex relationships between women before 1965—the “romantic friendship” and the “butch-femme relationship”—have obscured and made culturally unintelligible the lives of lower middle-class lesbians and bisexual women who were neither politically active nor fighting publicly for urban lesbian space. This dissertation analyses the lives of this neglected group of women and argues that their subjectivities were constructed not only in relation to sexual attraction, but also in relation to class. Middle-class ideas of respectability and an antagonism to bar culture resulted in the formation of class-specific lesbian subjectivities.

This dissertation also suggests that women in same-sex relationships before the allegedly more liberal decades of the late twentieth century may actually have had slightly better relationships with families of origin than would later be the case. Greater adherence to notions of duty and obligation, fewer economic opportunities enabling women to live independently of

family, the lack of a publicly available discourse of pathology with which families could define and reject their wayward daughters, and the lack of later notions of “alternative” lesbian families and community meant that many remained rather closer to their families than would lesbians after 1965.

Examiners:

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I owe a debt of thanks to Richard Mackie, whose chance mention of the Swartz papers in 1993 took my gaze away from the history of respectability and class and towards the history of sexuality. Other friends and colleagues have aided in that process, and I acknowledge here particularly (yet in no particular order) Susan Johnston, Carolyn Strange, Sheila McManus, Christie Shaw, Elise Chenier, Becki Ross, and Pat Rasmussen. My yoga teacher, Ty Chandler, made sure in the final three years that the mind and the body worked with rather than against each other.

Without the testimonies of the narrators, this study would have been impossible. They provide richness, depth, and humour not usually available in written records, and they allow us a glimpse into a world otherwise unknown. I am tremendously grateful to the narrators for their willingness to share their stories and for their continued friendship. I am also grateful, as we should all be, for the actions of Dr. Donald Fraser and Mrs. Nancy Fraser Brooks, who could so easily have destroyed the papers of their aunt, Frieda Fraser, upon her death. They have left for the historical record what surely must be the richest collection of papers in Canadian lesbian history.

There must be two levels of being: the surface, and the spreading depths. To tell the whole story of a life, a writer must devise a means by which the two levels of existence can be recorded. The rapid passage of events and actions, the slow unfolding of single and solid moments of concentrated emotion.

Virginia Woolf

## INTRODUCTION

In 1923, Constance Grey wrote of her female friend, “darling Insect! I get quite lump-in-froaty when I think of her! Oohhh! Imagine when we meet again!”<sup>1</sup> She was twenty-one years old and was finishing her education in France, away from the confines of her upper middle-class family in Victoria, British Columbia. That a young middle-class woman should have expressed such an emotion about another woman might not be worthy of comment had the “romantic female friendships” of the nineteenth century still been in vogue, but by the 1920s such close attachments between women were beginning to be seen by sexologists and medical professionals as unnatural, a sign of “sexual inversion.” Sexuality in general, and women’s sexuality in particular, had become increasingly scrutinized, classified and controlled. It is with this control, and the ways in which lesbian and bisexual women in Canada came to construct and express their sexuality between 1910 and 1965 within such a context, that this dissertation is concerned.

This study seeks to understand how, in what was virtually a linguistic vacuum and without as many opportunities for meeting and socializing with others like themselves as are available today, women came to understand who they were in relation to same-sex desires. I shall demonstrate that, because of the invisibility of lesbian and bisexual subjectivities and histories, and because of the homophobia of the era in which their same-sex desires first occurred, the women interviewed for this dissertation construct their life stories in linear, essentialist, “coming out” narratives. Those narratives are structured much in the same way as are the stories of the emergence of lesbian and gay culture in Canada before the gay and lesbian rights movements of the 1970s: as narratives of triumph over adversity, of lesbian and gay warriors who fought heteronormativity to provide the social and political basis for the moderate acceptance with which sexual minorities live in the present day.

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<sup>1</sup> British Columbia Archives and Records Service [hereafter BCARS] Add. MSS. 2767, Constance Grey Swartz, Box 1, File 1, Journal, 1 September 1923.

This analysis of the construction of subjectivities and of the narratives arising from them will involve the investigation of several important factors in women's lives: the historical context in which they grew up; the norms of sexuality and gender with which they were raised as children; the timing and the nature of their sexual exploration with other girls or women; the relationships that were significant in their lives, with sexual partners and families; and the finding of community based on same-sex attraction. It will be demonstrated that each of these factors was crucial in the formation of subjectivity based on same-sex desire and in the ways in which each woman constructed the narrative of her life.

This dissertation makes important contributions to the history of sexuality. It will add to the historiography by providing an analysis of the lives and relationships of two groups of women who have largely been invisible: Canadian versions of "romantic friends," and lesbians from the lower middle class. The latter group, which I argue is made culturally unintelligible by the dominance of the romantic friendship and the butch-femme couple in lesbian culture and historiography, will be shown to have formed subjectivities and communities on the basis of a class reaction to butch-femme couples and the bar scene. Their inclusion in lesbian historiography is crucial, as they were arguably the largest group among lesbians during the period under study.

I situate this study in relation to an ongoing discussion among lesbians and historians about who should be counted as lesbian, and who should not, on the basis of whether or not physical sexual relationships can be proven. The evidence discussed here shows that most of the women can be proven to have had physical sexual relationships with other women, and that those who cannot be shown to have explored a physical same-sex relationship should nevertheless be included in lesbian history because of their manifesting other attributes of long-term romantic partnership.

I will also discuss the relationships women had with their families of origin and the degree to which those relationships were negatively affected by their sexualities. I challenge

linear and progressive notions of improving relationships with family concomitant with increasing social liberalism and tolerance of lesbianism. I argue that women before lesbian rights and second-wave feminism may actually have had *better* relationships with their families because of the lack of a publicly available discourse of lesbian pathology.

Bisexuality is also examined in this dissertation, albeit not as extensively as lesbianism. One of the sources I discuss, Constance Grey Swartz, would traditionally, in historical works, have suffered the fate of many a woman who had relationships with both sexes: either her same-sex relationships would have been ignored, downplayed, or dismissed as a phase in development, or she would have been “claimed” by lesbian historians seeking evidence of lesbian relationships in the past. I argue that she was actually bisexual in desire. The sources examined here suggest very strongly that we must be careful not to impose such rigidly dichotomous categories of sexuality that we erase the experiences and subjectivities of bisexual women and others who do not conform to the dichotomy of “heterosexual” and “homosexual.”

The subject of women’s sexuality in Canada has usually been examined by historians with regard to its more “public” or external aspects; attitudes towards and policies governing birth control, child bearing and rearing, the relationship between women and their doctors, and the punitive control of “inappropriate” female sexuality have all been the subject of historical debate.<sup>2</sup> Other aspects of sexuality, however, such as “unconsummated” desires, erotic fantasies, same-sex desires and relationships, compromises made between desires and acceptable

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Angus McLaren and Arlene Tigar McLaren, *The Bedroom and the State: The Changing Practices and Politics of Contraception and Abortion in Canada, 1880-1980* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986); Wendy Mitchinson, *The Nature of Their Bodies: Women and Their Doctors in Victorian Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Susan Johnston, “Twice Slain: Female Sex-Trade Workers and Suicide in British Columbia, 1870-1920,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, vol. 5 (1994), 147-166; and Carolyn Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1995).

behaviour, and the internal processes by which women become sexual subjects, have received comparatively little attention.

That there should be a dearth of scholarship about the less public side to women's sexuality is perhaps not surprising. The very absence of source material makes such a study difficult. Historians are able to track the development of methods of contraception and the attempts to control and restrict their use, or to illustrate the ways in which the medical profession, government, the various denominations of the Church, and social reformers sought to define and control the nature of acceptable sexuality. This may be achieved by examining the wide variety of discourses which found their expression in medical texts and journals, bureaucracies, agencies of education and welfare, the punitive arms of the State, religious doctrine, and reform rhetoric. In order to discover the individual nature of sexuality, however, and to uncover its deeper levels, the historian is forced both to re-examine the official sources and to find personal testimonies which reinstate individual lives into the history of sexuality.

The study of women's sexuality is especially difficult because of the relative lack of personal testimonies in the form of letters, memoirs, diaries and journals. In addition, these types of written sources come almost exclusively from women of the middle and upper classes. The statistics of fertility, maternal and infant mortality, prostitution, and incarceration in asylums, and the records of hospitals and medical practitioners allow both the examination of general trends and, in some instances, the analysis of individual cases. Several important studies in the history of sexuality in Canada, discussed below, have employed these sources to present complex pictures of the dynamic relationship between what was officially said and what was privately done in the realm of sex, but have been limited by their sources in how extensively they could explore the ways in which sexuality was individually constructed. Oral history has supplemented the written sources available, but few oral testimonies are available for the early twentieth century. Without substantial individual testimony, it is difficult to assess sexuality where it occurred out of public sight and state governance.

This dissertation is concerned with an area of sexuality largely out of public sight and state control for much of Canadian history: relationships between women. Sexual and romantic relationships between women have received little attention in Canada's historiography, partly because same-sex relationships between women in the past were much less visible than both heterosexual and gay relationships, and partly because of disciplinary and societal homophobia. Women in Canada before the mid-twentieth century were subject to a discourse that held that they were sexually passive compared to men and were restricted in their geographical and social mobility by gender norms that posited them as the dependants of men and the mothers of the nation's children. It is therefore not surprising that Canadian society, following broader Western norms, could not fully conceive of a lesbian sexuality until fairly recently, and that women were less able to form communities based on same-sex activity than were men.

Given the dearth of scholarship on pre-1965 lesbian and bisexual history in Canada, it is imperative that historians undertake research that will bring to light the experiences of those lesbian and bisexual women whose sexual subjectivities were formed in the era before second-wave feminism and lesbian rights. Women experiencing same-sex desires in that period seldom possessed the terminology with which to describe and understand them, had little understanding of their bodies and thus of the nature of sexual desire, and had limited access to community based on sexual orientation.

### **The Historiography of Normative Sexuality in Canada**

Before examining those works in lesbian, gay, and bisexual history which most explicitly inform this work, it is first necessary to outline some of the important works on normative sexuality in Canada, for it was against normative ideas of appropriate sexuality that lesbian and

bisexual women had to define themselves.<sup>3</sup> A number of Canadian studies examine aspects of both “acceptable” and “unacceptable” heterosexuality. For example, Angus McLaren and Arlene Tigar McLaren’s study of contraception and abortion in Canada, *The Bedroom and the State*, discusses the relationship between women’s struggle to control their fertility and the politics associated with this contentious issue.<sup>4</sup> In *Making and Breaking the Rules*, Andrée Lévesque uses a variety of government, judicial and church records to examine the dominant discourses of femininity, motherhood, and sexuality in Quebec between 1919 and 1939, and the degree of resistance to those discourses. The relationship between patriarchal norms regarding sexuality and the treatment meted out to women (and some men) in sexual assault cases is discussed in Karen Dubinsky’s *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929*. These works illustrate the degree to which sexuality was at once both a private and a public matter; sexuality was interwoven with the political and religious life of the nation.

As there have been relatively few studies of women in early- to mid-twentieth-century Canada which look exclusively at sexuality, much of the scholarship on the subject is to be found in larger works or collections. These works examine the wider picture of women’s experience, and situate sexuality within the rubric of changing gender relations. For example, in her examination of Canadian women’s experience of World War II, Ruth Roach Pierson discusses the impact on gender relations of the entry of women into some areas of employment and service from which they had previously been excluded. She argues that the military became concerned to preserve women’s image of femininity and respectable sexuality, which it was felt was jeopardized by this temporary change in women’s role.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Those normative ideas are discussed more fully in Chapter One.

<sup>4</sup> Angus McLaren and Arlene Tigar McLaren, *The Bedroom and the State*.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Roach Pierson, *“They’re Still Women After All”: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986), 129.

Several studies of moral and social control in early twentieth-century Canada reveal the relationship between norms of sexuality and movements supporting racial and social purity. Mariana Valverde's *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, Michael Bliss' "'Pure Books on Avoided Subjects': Pre-Freudian Sexual Ideas in Canada," and Angus McLaren's *Our Own Master Race* discuss the importance to Canadian reformers of controlling fertility and sexuality, especially of those deemed "unfit."<sup>6</sup> Each of these works shows clearly that non-marital and/or non-reproductive sexual behaviours were not only deemed unrespectable in Canadian society, but also were thought to indicate that an individual was unfit morally and perhaps physically as well.

But it was not only in the heyday of eugenics in Canada that sexuality was thought to be linked to one's fitness as an individual and as a citizen. In their monographs on postwar Canadian culture, both Mary Louise Adams and Mona Gleason demonstrate that there existed intimate links between sexual behaviour and definitions of the "normal" and "ideal."<sup>7</sup> In

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<sup>6</sup> Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991); Michael Bliss, "'Pure Books on Avoided Subjects': Pre-Freudian Sexual Ideas in Canada," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1970), 89-108; Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race: The Eugenics Movement in English Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990). Valverde explores the connections between racial and sexual purity and first-wave feminism in "'When the Mother of the Race Is Free': Race, Reproduction, and Sexuality in First-Wave Feminism." in *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, eds. Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 3-26, as does Carol Lee Bacchi in *Liberation Deferred?: The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists 1877-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983). And James G. Snell relates the control of sexuality to broader issues of social control in "'The White Life For Two': The Defence of Marriage and Sexual Morality in Canada, 1890-1914." in *Canadian Family History: Selected Readings*, ed. Bettina Bradbury (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1992), 381-400.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Mona Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal: Psychology, Schooling, and the Family in Postwar Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). Both of these works will be discussed in greater detail later in this dissertation, in relation to the experiences of the narrators, most of whom were subject to the very discourses that Adams and Gleason describe.

postwar Canada, the family was evermore the foundation of the nation and “was reified as a primary stabilizing influence on both individuals and the nation as a whole.”<sup>8</sup> In this context, non-normative gender or sexual behaviours were seen as resulting in “a spectrum of social problems...from increasing unwed motherhood, unfulfilled housewives, ineffective and absent fathers, greater incidence of child abuse and family desertion, to the growing threat of the sexual deviant—perceived to be homosexual—stalking young children.”<sup>9</sup>

Histories of Canadian sexuality give numerous examples of the dominant discourses which defined and shaped sexual experience in the early to mid twentieth century. These discourses had different origins, and were used in various ways by different groups and individuals, but they coalesced in an attempt to define and police sexuality in terms of categories of “normal” and “abnormal,” “respectable” and “unrespectable,” “healthy” and “unhealthy,” and “Christian” and “sinful.” Yet these discourses were not fully hegemonic in Canadian society. Works on Canadian sexuality illustrate the ways in which Canadian women (and men) resisted or modified the discourses of sexuality to suit their own individual circumstances. Certainly, there were behaviours that were more normative, definitions and attitudes more persuasive than others, but there were also transgressions of these rules which took place in the “private” spaces of Canadian homes, and in more “public” ways in other arenas as well. Studies of sexuality in Canada thus illustrate Foucault’s point that power relationships depend on “a multiplicity of points of resistance [which are] present everywhere in the power network.”<sup>10</sup> In both small and large measure, Canadians simultaneously conformed to, reshaped, and resisted the dominant discourses of sexuality.

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<sup>8</sup> Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal*, 82.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 95-96.

While valuable indeed for understanding the dominant discourses which ruled Canadian women in the period under study, the above works cannot, by virtue of their focuses, provide information on the experiences of and attitudes towards lesbians and bisexual women. It has been the lot of lesbian and bisexual scholars and community members to undertake the research and writing of that aspect of Canadian history, having examined the scholarship on normative sexuality and found it wanting. In truth, it may be said that this project has really only been undertaken for lesbian history, since at time of writing the only paper on the history of female bisexuality in Canada is one I have written, segments of which are included in this dissertation. This regrettable circumstance is part of an overall “queer void” in Canadian historiography.<sup>11</sup>

### **Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Histories**

While both academic scholars and community writers have been producing works on lesbian and gay history since the 1970s, it is really within the last ten years that the field has grown considerably, both within and outside academe. It is now possible to find lesbian and gay history in many important historical journals, and the history of bisexuality is now being examined in published works as well, albeit on a very small scale. It remains the case, however, that lesbian and bisexual women’s history and research are marginalized in academic publishing,

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<sup>11</sup> The word “queer” in this context refers broadly not only to lesbians and gay men, but also to bisexuals and those who prefer to identify as queer rather than adopting one of the dominant categories of sexual orientation. Drawing on radical developments in gay and lesbian political organizing, queer theory began as an attempt to deconstruct the binaries of heterosexual and homosexual, and to make the construction of binaries of sexuality and consequent social norms central objects of inquiry. See Lisa Duggan, “Making it Perfectly Queer,” in *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, eds. Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter (New York & London: Routledge, 1996), 167 and Donna Penn, “Queer: Theorizing Politics and History,” *Radical History Review* 62 (Spring 1995), 29. It should be noted here that none of the narrators would use the word “queer” about themselves because of its pejorative uses in earlier decades and in the present day.

and consequently there are still many aspects of our history which remain unexplored.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, little of the scholarship on lesbian and gay history refers to Canada. There is perhaps less “hiding” of lesbian history than in the past,<sup>13</sup> but the tendency to ignore obvious same-sex relationships, to look for male lovers to counter the suggestion of lesbianism, and to downplay erotic language between women, which Lillian Faderman lamented in 1982,<sup>14</sup> continues to circumscribe the writing of lesbian and bisexual women’s histories. But the writing of those histories is also made problematic by the lesser availability of primary source material, and by the debates over who and what should be included in lesbian and bisexual history, discussed later in this study. As Valerie Traub recently suggested,

‘The history that will be,’ I suspect, will require moving beyond identity politics as the basis of lesbian scholarship. For as powerful as the claims of identity are, they are neither universally appropriate to the past nor conducive to epistemological claims that extend beyond pointing, ‘Look there! Look, there’s another one!’<sup>15</sup>

Regrettably, very little scholarship on sexuality focuses on same-sex relationships between women in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada. We are only just beginning to look for and point to those relationships. As the gay and lesbian history movement grew out of the gay and lesbian rights movements, “gay historians have looked for the historical

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<sup>12</sup> See Lisa Duggan, “History’s Gay Ghetto: The Contradictions of Growth in Lesbian and Gay History,” in Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York & London: Routledge, 1995), 144-154 for discussion of this issue.

<sup>13</sup> The Fraser-Williams correspondence examined in this study is an example of the new tolerance, as it was the nephew and niece of Frieda Fraser who recognized the historical value of the collection and chose to make it publicly available rather than destroying it, which would have been more likely in earlier times.

<sup>14</sup> Lillian Faderman, “Who Hid Lesbian History?” in *Lesbian Studies: Present and Future*, ed. Margaret Cruikshank (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982), 115-121.

<sup>15</sup> Valerie Traub, “The Rewards of Lesbian History,” *Feminist Studies* 25, 2 (Summer 1999), 392.

roots of the contemporary movement.”<sup>16</sup> That has meant an overwhelming emphasis on political organizations and legal reform, and on the visible lesbian and gay communities arising after the Second World War. Those few studies which concentrate on the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century do offer some important insights, particularly on the subject of public condemnation in mainstream media of non-conformist sexualities and the simultaneous uses of that coverage for lesbian identity and community formation. Several of these works are directly relevant to this study, as they describe the homophobic cultural norms with which lesbians and bisexual women had to contend, the repercussions for those who dared to transgress heteronormativity, and the early formation of lesbian and bisexual subjectivities and communities.

In her study of lesbian imagery in *Chatelaine* between 1950 and 1969, Valerie Korinek reveals that the magazine published articles—largely negative—about “female homosexuals,” their abnormality, and their causes and cures. Korinek also argues, however, that *Chatelaine* published short stories which, using a “perverse” reading, lesbians among its readership could interpret in lesbian terms. Stories, illustrations, articles about friendships and other relationships between women and advertisements were, Korinek suggests, read by a lesbian audience who “could easily resist the preferred meanings of the material and opt for alternate interpretations that more aptly reflected their sense of themselves.”<sup>17</sup> That women of the period did read such material in a “perverse” manner is confirmed both by the film *Forbidden Love* for Canada, and by Sherrie Inness, in *The Lesbian Menace*, for the United States.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Maynard, “In Search of ‘Sodom North’: The Writing of Lesbian and Gay History in English Canada, 1970-1990,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* (March-June 1994), 123.

<sup>17</sup> Valerie Korinek, “‘Don’t Let Your Girlfriends Ruin Your Marriage’: Lesbian Imagery in *Chatelaine* Magazine, 1950-1969,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 33, 3 (Fall 1998), 105.

<sup>18</sup> *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Story of Lesbian Lives*, Lynn Fernie & Aerlyn Weissman, dir., National Film Board of Canada, 1992; Sherrie A. Inness, *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and the Representation of Lesbian Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press,

In their study of Montreal's "yellow press" in the 1950s and 1960s, Ross Higgins and Line Chamberland demonstrate that press coverage of the lesbian and gay communities usually portrayed them as perverted and/or humorous. The exposure of "deviants" was one of the main aims of the "yellow press," yet in titillating their readers with knowledge of forbidden sexual underworlds the press was also facilitating the entry into those worlds of women and men who were questioning their sexual orientation.<sup>19</sup>

While historians of lesbian experience in Canada have used oral testimonies to examine the 1970s and 1980s, little oral history has been undertaken on the years between 1910 and 1965.<sup>20</sup> A notable exception is Elise Chenier's thesis, "Tough Ladies and Troublemakers: Toronto's public lesbian community, 1955-1965," which uses oral testimonies to examine the creation of Toronto's working-class lesbian bar community, its relationship to the Chinese community, to prostitution, and to the illegal drug trade, and its importance as the foundation for, and its conflicts with, later feminist organization. Chenier demonstrates clearly the relationship between types of lesbian identity and community and the categories of class, gender and ethnicity.<sup>21</sup>

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1997), 79-100. *Forbidden Love* uses interviews with lesbians who were involved in lesbian communities in the 1950s and 1960s, supplemented with film footage and a fictional romance, to describe lesbian life in postwar Canada.

<sup>19</sup> Ross Higgins and Line Chamberland, "Mixed Messages: Gays and Lesbians in Montreal Yellow Papers in the 1950s," Paper presented to the International Conference on Gay and Lesbian Studies, Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality? (Amsterdam, December 1987). In Ian McKay, ed., *The Challenge of Modernity: A Reader on Post-Confederation Canada* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992), 422-431.

<sup>20</sup> One important contribution to the oral history of Canadian lesbian experience is Becki Ross, *The House That Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995). Ross does not, however, describe the histories of her narrators before the advent of 1970s lesbian-feminism.

<sup>21</sup> Elise Chenier, "Tough Ladies and Troublemakers: Toronto's public lesbian community, 1955-1965" (MA thesis, Queen's University, 1995).

A work which most closely approximates the American study *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* in its balanced portrayal of the bar culture,<sup>22</sup> Chenier's thesis is an important point of comparison for this study. While I too examine some of the Lesbians Making History Project interviews Chenier uses in her thesis, my interview research is concerned primarily with lower middle-class women, whose understanding of their sexuality was influenced by unfavourable class and respectability-driven responses to the very women Chenier describes. For many of the women in this study, the bar was a boundary-marker between the "respectable" and "unrespectable" parts of the lesbian community. For many middle-class lesbians in particular, the bar was an unknown and unexplored site of lesbian socializing. Chenier's analysis is therefore crucial to my exploration of divisions of class within lesbianism.<sup>23</sup>

Line Chamberland has also researched the lives of bar lesbians. Her article "Remembering Lesbian Bars: Montreal, 1955-1975" examines bars as lesbian social spaces and demonstrates the ways in which the bar culture made lesbians public and the ways in which they were an appropriation of public space for lesbians.<sup>24</sup> Chamberland's research is important to this study in that she demonstrates, albeit without reference to personal testimonies, the links

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<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Histories of romantic friendships, Boston marriages, and other relationships among middle-class women largely examine the lives of women whose class privilege allowed them not to work in paid employment and women who were in salaried positions in educational institutions or the government and civil service. The histories of working-class communities of butch-femme couples largely address the lives of women in lower waged positions. Chenier also shows that many of the women in Toronto's butch-femme culture survived through prostitution. The majority of women in this study were in mid-level clerical positions or such middle-class employment as nursing or teaching. It is this group that Chenier describes as "uptowners" who visited the bars only occasionally.

<sup>24</sup> Line Chamberland, "Remembering Lesbian Bars: Montreal 1955-1975," in *Gay Studies From the French Cultures: Voices from France, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, and The Netherlands* (New York: The Harrington Park Press, 1993), 231-269.

between social class, occupation, and bar attendance. As this study will demonstrate for English Canada, Chamberland shows that lesbians in French Canada were divided by class when it came to their use of social space.

Steven Maynard's "Through A Hole In The Lavatory Wall" argues that a police system of "discovery" and surveillance was, in the early twentieth century, instrumental in altering public perceptions of homosexual activity generally, transforming it from something incomprehensible into something readily viewed and monitored in the public interest.<sup>25</sup> Maynard's conclusions can be transposed to the world of female sexuality in that the very public discussions and discovery of sexual deviation, venereal disease and promiscuity in postwar Canada made the language of sexuality much more available to a reading and viewing public than ever before. As the subsequent chapters will reveal, the twentieth-century expert played a key role in the discovery of all manner of "deviant" sexualities, and in the promotion of values and practices thought to combat them. Medical professionals, social workers, educators and the state all functioned to disseminate categories and theories of sexuality which became hegemonic in Canadian society. While it was the male "deviant" and "predator" with whom these professionals were mainly concerned, their categorizations also served to pathologize female same-sex activity.

In *The Regulation of Desire*, Gary Kinsman examines the creation of "homosexuality" as a problem, and the attempts to control it in Canada, America and England. Kinsman's work is perhaps the only text to attempt a survey of the history of sexuality in Canada. He places the development of heterosexist oppression of lesbians and gay men within the context of the development of capitalism, arguing that "Heterosexual hegemony necessarily involves lesbian

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<sup>25</sup> Steven Maynard, "Through A Hole In The Lavatory Wall: Homosexual subcultures, police surveillance, and the dialectics of discovery, Toronto, 1890-1930" *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, 2 (October 1994), 207-242.

and gay subordination.”<sup>26</sup> Kinsman portrays the heterosexist oppression of gay men and lesbians as the result of economic forces. As Jeffrey Weeks has argued, however, a materialist approach “poses the danger of seeing the restrictive definitions of homosexual behaviours as a necessary effect of a pre-existing causative complex (usually ‘capitalism’).”<sup>27</sup> *The Regulation of Desire* is also primarily about the regulation of male desire. While giving a place to women in a history of sexuality, Kinsman offers mainly a study of men.

Because of the newness of the field in Canada, scholars of lesbian, bisexual and gay history rely extensively on foreign scholarship, which offers many important points of comparison and contrast, particularly that regarding the United States. Those of us working in Canada look often for theoretical and research leads to the growing number of important American works on pre-Stonewall lesbian and gay history in particular, and to a lesser degree to the more contemporary and theoretical works on bisexuality. While the historical contexts might be different, Canadian lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men shared with their American counterparts many subcultural characteristics of individual and community life. And since the major urban areas of Vancouver, Toronto and Montréal were close enough to the American border to permit easy travel between the two nations, American “lesbigay” culture has historically provided many Canadians with social opportunities beyond their own residential areas. Moreover, as will be shown later, some aspects of Canadian lesbian culture—such as the use of dildos—were likely derivatives of American lesbian culture. It is therefore important to consider here a few of the major foreign works that have influenced this study, and which offer useful comparisons for Canadian lesbian history.

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<sup>26</sup> Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1996), 40.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, “Discourse, desire and sexual deviance: some problems in a history of homosexuality,” in *The Making of the Modern Homosexual*, ed. Kenneth Plummer (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 87.

American studies of same-sex sexuality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have often relied in part upon autobiographical writings, journals, and letters. These sources have been particularly important for the history of lesbian and bisexual women, because of their relative lack of representation in the records of institutions of punitive control of “deviant” sexuality. While there exist medical case records of lesbian and bisexual women, there are comparatively few instances in which the stories of lesbians and bisexual women come to light in government, police or court records, sources which have provided at least some means of accessing the lives of gay or bisexual men.

There exists as yet no comprehensive study of lesbians in Canada in the early twentieth century. Many of Lillian Faderman’s conclusions about the United States in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* can, however, be extrapolated to the Canadian context. Faderman argues that the turn of the twentieth century was “the beginning of a lengthy period of general closing off of most affectional possibilities between women.”<sup>28</sup> She traces the emergence of lesbian subcultures and suggests that the twentieth century saw the erosion of the “sexual innocence” of pre-twentieth-century lesbianism, in the form of the romantic friendship, and the creation of lesbian identities and sexual knowledge between and among lesbians. I shall take issue in Chapter Three with some of Faderman’s arguments about sexual knowledge, but I do agree with her overall suggestion that theories about intimate relationships between women did change in the twentieth century and that lesbian subjectivities and subcultures changed in relation to those theories.

While there were important differences between the lives of American and Canadian lesbians, Faderman’s analysis of the development of negative attitudes towards female-female friendship and intimacy in the United States offers important insights for Canadian women’s history. Perhaps not as rapidly colonized by the ideas of the sexologists and Freud, Canada was

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<sup>28</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 4.

nevertheless party to an increasing obsession with studying, classifying and controlling sexuality in its many “natural” and “unnatural” forms. Heterosexual as well as lesbian and bisexual women were subject to the trends Faderman describes.

The archival collections on which lesbian historians rely rarely contain specific information about physical sexuality. One must therefore tread carefully when ascribing a particular sexual orientation to the author of any set of letters or diaries. In *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Lillian Faderman examines same-sex relationships between women in the period before the rapid changes of the twentieth century. Her focus is on those relationships between women which were generally accepted by society as healthy, at least until the ideas of the sexologists began to permeate medical and social thinking. Faderman argues that these relationships were most likely not sexual ones.

Using a wide range of private papers and literary sources to support her analysis, Faderman argues that the “romantic friendships” of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were socially sanctioned relationships in which “women’s strongest emotions and affections [were] directed toward each other,” closely approximating modern lesbian experience, but that these earlier relationships were not likely to include a genital component because women generally were innocent of sexual knowledge and indoctrinated with notions of female sexual passivity.<sup>29</sup> Faderman has been criticized for valorizing the “romantic friendship” to the extent that she obscures the possibility that some of the women in these relationships would have had physical relationships, while others would not.<sup>30</sup> Relying on definitions of “lesbian” requiring a genital component to relationships, critics of Faderman’s work suggest that she includes as “lesbian” women who possibly were not. While I do not agree that genital sexuality is required for lesbianism to exist, I do dispute some of Faderman’s generalizations. In both *Surpassing the*

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<sup>29</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 16-20.

<sup>30</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, “Does It Matter If They Did It?” in *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), 20-23.

*Love of Men* and *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Faderman gives too little credence to the possibility that some of the women she discusses were in fact bisexual rather than lesbian, assuming instead that the existence of heterosexual marriages or other relationships with men represents repression of a lesbian identity.<sup>31</sup>

Despite these flaws, Lillian Faderman's work remains extremely important, whether as foundational text or as significant point of departure, for most lesbian historians. It was her scholarship, perhaps more than most others, which paved the way for the detailed analyses of women's diaries and letters which provide us with evidence of numerous same-sex relationships among women of the middle class in America and Britain. To a lesser degree, Faderman also provided the groundwork for studies of the working-class butch/femme bar culture of mid twentieth-century America.<sup>32</sup> And in her most recent work, *To Believe in Women*, Faderman rightly points out that women in same-sex relationships were prominent in every social cause relating to women's rights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and thus have played a crucial role in the political, economic, and social advancement of *all* American women.<sup>33</sup>

In her latest work, Faderman makes an important, if tentative, correction to one of the most criticized aspects of *Surpassing the Love of Men*. She acknowledges that postmodernist criticisms of the use of the identity label "lesbian" in historical studies have "merit and serve as an important corrective to a simplistic temptation to name the 'lesbians' in history," a temptation to which she has been accused of succumbing in her earlier work. Faderman provides a more nuanced outline of her analysis when she argues that "if enough material that reveals what

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<sup>31</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* and *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*.

<sup>32</sup> *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* was researched and published at the same time as Kennedy and Davis' *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* but is, in general, cited less often and less favourably in relation to its portrayal of butch and femme relationships.

<sup>33</sup> Lillian Faderman, *To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done for America - A History* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

people *do* and *say* is available, we can surely make apt observations about their *behavior*...I use the term 'lesbian' as an *adjective* that describes intense woman-to-woman relating and commitment."<sup>34</sup> Although Faderman is taking a humorous prod at her critics in her explication of her stance, she does grant the need for precision.<sup>35</sup>

While doubtless there will still be those who decry Faderman's suggestion that "non-sexual" woman-to-woman relationships can and should be termed "lesbian," she has at least responded somewhat to her critics' charge that she included as lesbian women who may not have been. I still contend, however, that Faderman has included as "lesbian," in behavioural terms, women whose behaviour might equally well be described as "bisexual." The subtitle of her book should perhaps therefore be "What Lesbians and Bisexual Women Have Done for America."

Difficulties of definition and evidence, such as those with which Faderman has had to contend, make those personal records which *are* specific about physical relationships between women especially valuable. Two publications devoted to such testimonies which are particularly relevant to this thesis are Elsa Gidlow's *Elsa: I Come With My Songs* and Helena Whitbread's edited collection of the diaries of Anne Lister, *I Know My Own Heart*. Gidlow's autobiography, while published in 1986 after a lifetime of feminist activism and literary work, and therefore unquestionably a consciously constructed account of a life, is a rare insight into the life of a lesbian woman who spent her childhood and adolescence in early twentieth-century Canada. Gidlow details the process of her realization that she was "different" and describes in detail the

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<sup>34</sup> Faderman, *To Believe in Women*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> She suggests that "If there had been more space on the title page, and if the phrase had not been so aesthetically dismal, I might have subtitled this book, with greater accuracy, 'What Women of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries, Whose Chief Sexual and/or Affectional and Domestic Behaviors Would Have Been Called "Lesbian" If They Had Been Observed in the Years after 1920, Have Done for America.' When I slip into the shorthand of referring to these women as 'lesbians,' readers might keep my alternate subtitle in mind." Faderman, *To Believe in Women*, 3.

physicality as well as the emotions of her relationships, which began when she was sixteen and living in Montréal.<sup>36</sup>

The diaries of Anne Lister, while not Canadian, are particularly interesting in relation to the study of sexuality because of their detail and also because they were written in code. Lister's diaries, written between 1791 and 1840, speak frankly of the physical nature of her relationships with women, and are unusual in that regard alone, for women of that period were rarely specific about the nature of their relationships. But the fact that the intimate portions of the diaries were written in an extremely complex code (which Lister developed for the purpose of secret correspondence with a female partner) makes this an especially valuable tool for understanding sexual subjectivity, and awareness of and resistance to dominant heterosexual discourse.<sup>37</sup> While the context in which the diaries were written was very different to that in which the women in this study lived, the Lister diaries suggest to us that genital sexuality between women, awareness of the nature of one's desire, and an appreciation of the social consequences of that desire could exist in the absence of a publicly available discourse about female same-sex sexuality.

The problem of reticence in source material can be overcome somewhat by the use of oral history. Oral history has provided a unique window into the lives of lesbians and gay men in America and England.<sup>38</sup> In *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy

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<sup>36</sup> Elsa Gidlow, *Elsa: I Come With My Songs. The Autobiography of Elsa Gidlow* (San Francisco: Booklegger Press, 1986).

<sup>37</sup> Helena Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister 1791-1840* (New York & London: New York University Press, 1988).

<sup>38</sup> There are several oral histories of individual lesbians and gay men and of members of gay communities which illustrate the difficulties involved both in coming to terms with a lesbian or gay identity and creating lesbian and gay networks, and maintaining their durability once created. Among these are Nancy and Casey Adair's *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (New York: New Glide/Delta, 1978); Kevin Porter and Jeffrey Weeks, eds., *Between the Acts: Lives of Homosexual Men 1885-1967* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991); and most

and Madeline D. Davis examine the lives of lesbian women and the lesbian bar culture in Buffalo, New York, from the 1930s to the 1950s. Whereas much previous feminist research has portrayed the “butch/femme” relationships of the bar culture as the hegemonic adoption of heterosexual gender role models, Kennedy and Davis illustrate the importance of these relationships for the eventual formation of community identity in the face of heterosexist repression. They also demonstrate that in some ways lesbian sexuality, as expressed in butch and femme identities, subverted rather than reproduced heterosexual gender relationships, by placing the responsibility for sexual satisfaction of her partner on the butch lesbian. Kennedy and Davis deal rather less well with the issue of class, however. The community on which they based their research was predominantly working class, and *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* fails satisfactorily to account for differences between working-class and middle-class lesbian socialization and the role it played in identity, community formation and politics.<sup>39</sup>

In his enlightening and persuasive study of New York, George Chauncey uses extensive oral interviews and documentary research to chart the urban geography and cultural vibrancy of the gay male world of the early twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> Chauncey challenges the assumption that the Second World War marked the beginning of the gay subculture, arguing instead that there had existed from the turn of the century a large gay community with its own distinct patterns of socialization and recreation. He also demonstrates that the negative discourse of “homosexuality” as “abnormal” was not widespread among gay men (particularly working-class men) before the middle of the century, and that pejorative attitudes towards same-sex activity

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recently, Esther Newton’s *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>40</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

were more likely to be based on inversion of ascribed gender status than on homosexuality per se. Among gay men of the early twentieth century, gender roles—particularly the assumed “masculine” and “feminine” sexual roles—were the predominant way of structuring the world.<sup>41</sup> It was not until later in the century that a discourse of homosexuality found its way into the gay community, and it was adopted at first primarily by middle-class men.

Class is problematic in Chauncey’s work, in that his somewhat rigid dichotomy between working-class and middle-class types of sexual identity fails to account for the moderate flexibility of socialization between class groups that his evidence suggests. Nevertheless, in its portrayal of the gay male world as creative of, as well as reactive to, social mores and urban development, *Gay New York* provides a crucial framework for historical analysis of sexual subcultures in the early twentieth century. What Chauncey shows us is that gay individuals understood their desires and behaviours in ways not necessarily explicable within emerging scientific categorization, or in today’s identity-driven terms. It is crucial, therefore, when examining same-sex relationships in the past, to examine the ways in which our historical subjects *did* understand their desires and actions.

The works of Chauncey, Kennedy and Davis form part of an increasing body of research on gay and lesbian communities in the United States. Community studies, which originally examined the communities that formed after the Second World War, have expanded to include new material on early twentieth-century community formation. Both *Gay New York* and *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* show that gay and lesbian communities formed in the United States as early as the turn of the century, an argument also made by Faderman in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*. These new community studies offer evidence that lesbians and gay men grouped together on the basis of sexual orientation well before the gay and lesbian rights

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<sup>41</sup> Chauncey suggests that gay/homosexual identities did not have resonance for the early twentieth-century men he discusses, and that those identities were later developments. He clearly differentiates the subjectivities of these men from those of avowedly gay men later in the century, but he nevertheless is including them in “gay” history, so I shall use the term here.

movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The publication in 1997 of Brett Beemyn's collection *Creating A Place for Ourselves*<sup>42</sup> exemplifies the new trend in queer community histories towards an analysis of "a neglected dimension of the urban experience—the organization of sexuality [and of] the social meaning of urban space and the composition of community."<sup>43</sup>

In addition to those lesbian and gay community histories described above, one American lesbian history in particular informs this dissertation. In her dissertation "'The very house of difference': Intersections of Identities in the Life Histories of Colorado Lesbians, 1940-1965," Katie Gilmartin examines oral narratives of forty women in the Colorado area to determine the ways in which their sexual identities intersected with their class, gender, racial, and ethnic identities.<sup>44</sup> She looks particularly, in her dissertation and in a subsequent article on the subject, at the relationship between lesbianism and class.<sup>45</sup> While insufficiently historical in nature, in that she provides very little historical information with which to contextualize her narrators' testimonies, Gilmartin's analysis is one of only a few that address the relationships and boundaries between working-class and middle-class lesbians before second-wave feminism. Previous work has largely focused on middle-class *or* working-class lesbians rather than on the relationships between them, the divisions and differences between their communities, and the attitudes of each group towards the other. It is this question with which Chapter Five of the present work is concerned. Most especially, I seek to understand the behavioural and spatial

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<sup>42</sup> Brett Beemyn, ed. *Creating A Place For Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>43</sup> Clifton Hood, "New Studies in Gay and Lesbian History," *Journal of Urban History* 24, 6 (September 1998), 782.

<sup>44</sup> Katie Gilmartin, "'The very house of difference': Intersections of Identities in the Life Histories of Colorado Lesbians, 1940-1965" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1995).

<sup>45</sup> Katie Gilmartin, "'We Weren't Bar People': Middle-Class Lesbian Identities and Cultural Spaces," *Gay & Lesbian Quarterly* 3 (1996), 1-51.

boundaries between Canada's working-class lesbian bar community, which has been discussed by Chamberland and Chenier, and lesbians of the lower middle class, who have been largely ignored in Canadian historiography.

### **Methodology**

Historical evidence of sexuality, and particularly of women's sexuality, can sometimes be hard to locate in traditional archival sources. Unless one is examining a form of sexual expression proscribed by law or otherwise dealt with by the State, a record of which might be found in a court document or in the records of a government department, the historian of sexuality must often sift through a significant amount of material before finding evidence of sexual behaviour. In the case of same-sex relations between women, regarded as unacceptable to Canadian society in the period 1910 to 1965 yet not prohibited by law, the historian's task is further complicated by an overwhelming gender bias in material regarding sexuality towards that of gay men.<sup>46</sup>

For the period 1910-1965, Canadian lesbian historians must rely heavily on private papers, and most especially on correspondence, to provide information about relationships between women. Such documents present both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, the historian is interpreting source material composed during the period under study, which is an advantage compared to oral history, in which a lifetime of reinterpretation and selective memory on the part of the narrator will influence the material to a considerable degree. This is not to say that correspondence and journals do not contain reinterpretation and selectivity, but

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<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of some of the problems involved in research gay and lesbian history, see Steven Maynard, "'The Burning, Wilful Evidence': Lesbian/Gay History and Archival Research" *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92), 195-201.

rather than the biases and representative strategies employed by the author do at least come from the period itself rather than from later influences.

On the other hand, documentary evidence of relationships can be difficult to interpret in that the authors, being usually deceased, cannot be questioned regarding the subtleties of their texts and cannot be asked to clarify certain issues, as can be done in the case of oral history. As in any personal communication, meaning is not always clear in women's letters to each other. In a letter, one usually sees a single moment of reflection on an event, rather than the gradual development of understanding that one might find expressed in a journal, where events are re-evaluated over time, or in an oral interview, in which the narrator can be asked supplementary questions to tease out changing or conflicting emotions. Even a journal can be limited in this regard, however, given that one usually only reads the perspective of its author. In an interview, the interviewer is able to ask about the responses of other parties, so as to gain a little information about alternative perspectives, albeit filtered through that of the narrator.

Given the tendency for archival repositories to collect only private material considered historically "significant"—because of archives' limited space and dwindling staff resources—any such material in an archive is likely to represent only the experiences of a small elite among women, if indeed source material can be found at all. It is for this reason, and because of its great richness as source material, that many scholars of lesbian and bisexual women's history have turned to oral history. Oral history is an especially useful methodology for the study of aspects of twentieth-century society, in that it opens up to the historian a realm of analysis not available to historians of earlier periods—the personal narration of historical experience mediated by the focus of the historian's topic of inquiry. Naturally, as with any historical source, oral history has its own particular advantages and disadvantages. The most frequent criticism of oral testimony is its lack of reliability as empirical "truth", because of narrators' tendencies to tell their stories in uneven, biased and subjective terms. As Elizabeth Tonkin remarks, even a professional historian "may have been experientially convinced by a narrator's account" and then

been disappointed to discover that it is inaccurate, even though they also know, “as part of their expertise, that sincere people need not be telling the truth and that all accounts must be tested.”<sup>47</sup>

This study uses a variety of primary sources, placed within the growing secondary literature on the history of sexuality. Five collections of personal papers provide most of the primary material for the 1910-1940 period. Twenty-six of my own interviews, one interview conducted by another graduate student, and nine interviews conducted by the Lesbians Making History Project provide the majority of the 1940-1965 material. These sources are supplemented by primary material drawn from a variety of government documents, newspapers, and published works of the period. Narrators were located in a variety of ways. Some were reached via personal contacts within the local Victoria lesbian community, and those women were able to put me in touch with others. I advertised in newspapers in Victoria, Vancouver, and Toronto, and sent calls for narrators and posters to lesbian and feminist organizations in British Columbia and Ontario. Several Ontario narrators were reached via the Metropolitan Community Church.<sup>48</sup> In selecting narrators for my own interviews, I chose to interview women who need not have been born in Canada but had to have lived in Canada for at least five years between 1910 and 1965. The minimum age for narrators was fifty-five, ensuring that all narrators would have reached young adulthood, at the very least, before 1965.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The social construction of oral history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 113.

<sup>48</sup> Four women came forward in response to newspaper advertisements. A further 7 were found via contacts with women’s organizations, the Lesbian Seniors Care Society of Victoria being particularly helpful. Of the remaining narrators, 7 were contacted via personal community contacts and 7 via the Metropolitan Community Church and a related women’s gathering. The Metropolitan Community Church, or MCC as it is affectionately known, is a Christian church founded in 1962 with the specific aim of welcoming gay men and lesbians unable to worship in mainstream churches. It has since expanded to include bisexual, transgender, transsexual, and intersex people.

<sup>49</sup> Two exceptions to these restrictions were made. Anne, an American, did not immigrate to Canada until the final year under study. Her background as a student and then faculty member in women’s colleges in the United States links her to an important part of the historiography on

The period under study and the sources used were chosen deliberately in order to analyse changing subjectivities. The period 1910 to 1965 was one of considerable change in the nature, extent, and form of discourses about female sexuality and about same-sex sexuality in particular. Changing ideas about female sexual passivity or expression, sexual and gender inversion or homosexuality, and the proportion of the population likely to be homosexual occurred throughout this period. Women constructing sexual subjectivities between 1910 and 1965 were therefore exposed to changing mores. In order to understand that process as fully as possible, it was necessary to use both written and oral sources. With the written sources, one is able to gain a sense of women's lives in the first few decades of the twentieth century. The oral sources were chosen in order to obtain very detailed and personal information about the period between 1930 and 1965, the like of which is not found in written records, either of a personal or institutional nature.

One of the peculiarities of oral history is that one obtains testimonies only from those individuals who want to or believe that they should be interviewed for the project. Naturally, this degree of self-selection results in bias in the material in favour of those who either have considered and constructed their narrative in formalized ways, have been interviewed previously, and/or who wish to situate themselves somehow in the broader framework of the interviewer's project. Several of the narrators for this study had been interviewed previously for academic or community history projects. They and others in the group regarded participation as a community-oriented and even political endeavour, the purpose of which was to make known to a younger generation of Canadian lesbians the conditions under which older women in the community lived and came out.

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women's relationships, however, and she was included in the study because of that experience. The youngest of the narrators, Jill, was only fifty when interviewed, but provides a British Columbia perspective. She also possessed sufficient awareness of her sexuality as a teenager in the early 1960s to render her perspective on sexuality an important one. Pseudonyms are used for all narrators except Lois and Reva, whose stories are already in the public domain via the film *Forbidden Love*, and who requested that their real names be used.

Certain narrative structures are common in this type of research with marginalized groups. Many lesbian women portray their lives as trials of adversity, and their coming out as the ultimate triumph over homophobia. And for the majority of lesbians and, in more recent times, bisexual women, coming out doubtless *is* the most overt, risky, and courageous step they have taken in their lives. The researcher must remain alert, however, to the possibility that some women, in the interest of serving the triumphant heroine narrative, may emphasize those parts which clearly exemplify hardship, courage and ultimate success, and may downplay those elements that suggest vacillation or closetedness of sexual orientation.

While I am certainly interested in uncovering aspects of the lesbian and bisexual past not previously recorded in Canadian history, and my interviews therefore seek a degree of veracity in order at least to describe what were the social contexts and individual experiences of my narrators' lives, I do not seek here to produce a fully generalizable and objective history of lesbian and bisexual women's lives in Canada before 1965. Not only is that not possible, given the number of women interviewed, and their race, class, and religious specificity, but it also is not the focus of this project. Rather, I seek to understand the ways in which these women, in particular historical and discursive contexts, came to understand their subjectivity in relation to their sexual selves. In this project, perspective is at least as important as "factual" memory. It will be shown in this study that the narration of lesbian and bisexual pasts has a particular and sometimes formulaic structure which might be said to make it a genre, "which provides a mode or code for people's transmission of experience, and, as well, by its own transmission, maintains a version of the past which people can use for their own ends."<sup>50</sup> It will be crucial, therefore, to examine the ways in which the narrators have constructed their stories in addition to seeking the raw data of their life experiences.

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<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts*, 114.

As Paul Thompson contends, not only must oral histories be contextualized so as to ensure a dialogue between material context and the narrator's (re)construction of their experience, but they must also be listened to and read *for* their internal contradictions, biases, exaggerations and repressions of information.<sup>51</sup> If the oral historian acknowledges from the start the importance of subjectivity in the narration of testimony, the oral testimony can allow a dynamic dialogue between the historical context and the narrator's version of their life within that context. This allows the historian to move flexibly between what can otherwise, with written sources, be two or more static explanations of the past. Oral history is unique among historical sources in that it "is collaboratively generated and created deliberately for historical purposes," making it a self-acknowledged exploration both of the past and of the interpretation of the past.<sup>52</sup>

In seeking to understand the importance of narrative structure in the narrators' sense of self, I accept that the nature of the portrayal of the past, rather than its degree of absolute truth, may be the more crucial aspect of the oral testimony. While the commonality of certain elements of their stories, in addition to supplementary primary and secondary research, does confirm the truth of their memories of societal condemnation of same-sex relationships, and of the negative consequences of pursuing them, many elements of these women's stories cannot be verified. What is significant about the stories, however, is the degree to which they reveal the importance of certain elements—language, desire, expression of that desire, formation of relationships based on that desire, and community—in the structuring of lesbian or bisexual women's portrayals of their subjectivity. This dissertation is primarily about how these lesbian

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<sup>51</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 239-240; 258.

<sup>52</sup> Cliff Kuhn and Marjorie L. McLellan, "Oral History," *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History* 11, 3 (Spring 1997), 4.

and bisexual women understand the historical formation of their sexuality in relation to their particular life experiences.

Much recent criticism of traditional oral history has come from feminist scholars and activists seeking to retrieve women's histories. Some feminist interviewers suggest that formal interview structures, set questions, and a focus on the narrator are patriarchal interviewing methods. Kristina Minister argues that this style "denies women the communication form that supports the topics women value." Further, she suggests that after the interview, a researcher can reveal to the narrator her/his personal investment in the project and invite the narrator's criticisms of the analysis.<sup>53</sup> Minister's analysis of oral history techniques is, however, somewhat essentialist, in that she argues for a women's communication style and women's favoured topics. Such rigidity is no less problematic than some of the more formal interview methods she describes, for it imposes on all women one set of preferred "female" styles.

A more balanced feminist approach may be that of Katherine Borland who, in the same collection, acknowledges the real possibility of conflicts over interpretation of oral testimony—an important issue—but suggests that allowing narrators to speak for themselves without interpretation may be illusory. As Borland contends, "the very fact that we constitute the initial audience for the narratives we collect influences the way in which our collaborators will construct their stories, and our later presentation of these stories—in particular publications under particular titles—will influence the way in which prospective readers will interpret the texts."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Kristina Minister, "A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview," in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York & London: Routledge, 1991), 35-6.

<sup>54</sup> Katherine Borland, "'That's Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York & London: Routledge, 1991), 64.

The focus of this dissertation is the interpretive, mutable, and subjective nature of sexuality, and the oral testimonies must therefore be viewed within the context of social construction. It is not my aim here to provide a series of narrated life histories, devoid of interpretation and offered up in the spirit of what Joan Wallach Scott has called “the evidence of experience.”<sup>55</sup> In the schema Scott describes, women’s experience speaks for itself and each woman’s experience has equivalent truth-value; the imposition of an interpretation of that experience from another’s perspective is seen as anathema to the feminist project. Too many feminist accounts of female identities propose such unitary epistemological subjects, external to patriarchal power and thus observable through such allegedly neutral feminist methods as the “feminist interview.”<sup>56</sup> I do not. Nor have the interviews and my uses of them been subject to the criticism of the narrators. In that sense, as well as in my establishing an overarching analysis of the material, mine is “a conventional univocal text, unless one counts what might be seen as excessive quoting to be an effort toward many-voiced discourse as opposed to exhortations of authority and a didactic mode of critique.”<sup>57</sup>

This study employed a structured yet flexible interview in which narrators were asked a series of questions over several days. Because of the intimate nature of the topic, the interviews began at the most superficial level and worked through to questions about physical sexuality, often taking between three and five sessions. There is a feminist analysis at work here, but one which emphasizes not the uncritical reclamation of lesbian and bisexual women’s lives but rather the understanding of their adoption, negotiation and rejection of social norms, their complicity in

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<sup>55</sup> Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991), 773-797.

<sup>56</sup> Jana Sawicki offers a critique of such feminist essentialism in “Foucault, feminism and questions of identity,” in Gary Gutting, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 286-313.

<sup>57</sup> Patti Lather, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/in the Postmodern* (New York & London: Routledge, 1991), 84.

and resistance to their own oppression and that of others, and the knowledge that women have not been and are not well served by arguments which stress a universal lesbian subject.

My own theoretical leanings are towards a social constructionist view of identity and subjectivity. Social constructionism is a broad grouping of theoretical approaches which explicate the “processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live.”<sup>58</sup> Social constructionism is often assumed to be a unified field,

with broad antipathy for the various forms of essentialism, realism, foundationalism and structuralism that have served to rationalize and sustain traditional claims to truth beyond perspective, transcendent rationality, universal morality, cultural superiority and progress without limit.<sup>59</sup>

While social constructionism is actually not unified in approach or in the degree of radicalism of its practitioners’ politics, it may fairly be said that most constructionists “openly espouse multivocality and anti-foundationalism; they defend subjugated knowledges against unitary notions of progress. In a word, they are incredulous toward Master narratives.”<sup>60</sup>

I maintain an incredulity towards master narratives in that I reject essentialist claims of innate sexual orientations, yet I recognize that such claims can have beneficial as well as detrimental effects for individuals and marginalized communities. As will be shown in future chapters, many women engaging in same-sex relationships before second-wave feminism and lesbian-feminism are made culturally unintelligible by subsequent norms of lesbian life. The dominant identity categories do not fit neatly with their experiences, nor with their

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<sup>58</sup> Kenneth Gergen, cited in Philip Manning, “Procedure, Reflexivity and Social Constructionism,” in *The Politics of Constructionism*, eds. Irving Velody and Robin Williams (London: Sage, 1998), 160.

<sup>59</sup> Kenneth Gergen, “Constructionist Dialogues and the Vicissitudes of the Political,” in *The Politics of Constructionism*, 33-34.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Lynch, “Towards a Constructivist Genealogy of Social Constructivism,” in *The Politics of Constructionism*, 13 (paraphrasing Lyotard).

understandings of themselves in the period under study. Despite this, it is precisely the modern and essentialized identity category of the lesbian that the narrators now apply to themselves and in relation to which their narratives are constructed.

A constructionist interpretation of these narratives will reveal that they conform to a linear and progressive plot structure and suggest the essentialism of sexual orientation, things to which the constructionist is necessarily opposed. It is important, however, that we recognize that essentialist and linear narratives have served these women well, in terms of their building a greater happiness and degree of self-esteem, and have also been crucial in the development of community politics and campaigns for legal rights and social recognition. This study therefore accepts the narrators' portrayals of their identities as intrinsic to themselves and argues for a recognition of the importance of "coming out" narratives as empowering strategies for women living in a society still largely hostile to same-sex relationships

How, though, does the feminist researcher avoid some of the traditional pitfalls of academic research about living "human subjects" while retaining critical integrity? It has sometimes been the tendency in the past for interviewers to abuse the relationship of trust that the interviewer-narrator relationship entails, and to eliminate, misrepresent or at least to minimize the voices of the narrators in the search for an objective, generalizable analysis. Given that the researcher retains ultimate control of the material, it is easy to appropriate narrators' experiences rather than allowing them to be heard. Balancing analysis with ethical use of the material is a difficult task indeed. As Jayati Lal suggests, "The issue of how one works against the tendency to appropriate another's experience while making the connections remains a productive source of tension that is perhaps never resolved."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Jayati Lal, "Situating Locations: The Politics of Self, Identity, and "Other" in Living and Writing the Text," in *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, ed. Diane Wolfe (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 201.

Many feminist scholars suggest that the imbalance involved in interview research is at least mitigated by efforts to acknowledge the subject position of the researcher and the degree to which that subject position might influence the analysis and even the range and nature of the narrator group.<sup>62</sup> My own subject position doubtless has had both negative and positive effects for this project. Certainly, being able to approach self-identified lesbians from the shared perspective of lesbian identity gave me an entrée into a community that has learned to distrust outsiders. That same lesbian identity also informs the choice of topic for the dissertation and the mode of analysis, for most assuredly questions of subjectivity and identity interest me on a personal as well as an academic level.

An area in which my subject position may have worked against this study is that of race and class. All the women interviewed for this study are white. Almost all are of Christian backgrounds, even if not practising Christians, and they are also overwhelmingly Protestant. Although many came from working-class or poor backgrounds, most are today comfortably well off. My ability to reach a wider range of narrators may have been affected by my own white, middle-class status, although it is impossible to determine the degree to which this might have been the case. Lesbians of colour were contacted, but did not meet the criteria for the study in terms of the time of residence in Canada.

The relative narrowness of the range of narrators in this study is mitigated, however, by two important considerations. The most significant is that this study examines the lives of a segment of the lesbian community—and bisexual women to a degree—previously underrepresented in lesbian historiography, even if they in some ways form part of a dominant group in society as a whole. Lesbian historiography has dealt almost exclusively with but two groups of women: the upper middle-class “romantic friends” of the eighteenth to the early

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<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Patti Lather, *Getting Smart*, 80 and Diane L. Fowlkes, “Moving from Feminist Identity Politics To Coalition Politics Through a Materialist Standpoint of Intersubjectivity in Gloria Anzálúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*,” *Hypatia* 12, 2 (Spring 1997), 109.

twentieth centuries, and the women of the postwar working-class bar culture of North American cities. Very few studies, and none for Canada, have examined the lives of lesbians of the lower middle class. The narrators for this study provide, for the first time in Canadian historiography, a perspective from this previously ignored socio-economic group.

In addition to bringing to light the stories of this under-researched group, this study examines the personal papers of four middle-class lesbian couples and one middle-class bisexual woman. These early twentieth-century documents reveal same-sex relationships which largely conformed to the structure and language of the romantic friendship but contained a more clearly expressed physicality than was found in earlier relationships between women. These types of relationships between women have also been ignored in Canadian historiography. The five collections of papers discussed here provide a first glimpse into Canadian versions of middle-class lesbian life.

Also discussed in this study are the testimonies of working-class women involved in Toronto's public bar culture in the 1950s and 1960s. These testimonies, obtained by the Lesbians Making History Project in the 1980s and added to by Elise Chenier in the 1990s, show that the Canadian bar culture shared in many ways the characteristics of the American bar cultures described by Lillian Faderman in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* and by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. Given that Chenier has used these testimonies in her study of the Toronto bar culture, my use of them here is for comparative purposes only.

It must be remembered that the Canadian lesbian community was, in the period under study, much less culturally diverse than its American counterpart in the same period or in the community that would form in Canada in the 1970s. Many of the narrators for this study reported that the community contained very few lesbians of colour until the late 1960s at the earliest. This opinion is borne out by two of the testimonies from the film *Forbidden Love* which

describe the largely monocultural nature of the lesbian community.<sup>63</sup> That I should have difficulty locating a wider range of narrators is in some ways not, therefore, surprising.

Even in the absence of other race and class perspectives among my own narrators, a comparative analysis must be employed, however. Any study of sexuality must examine the ways in which sexuality intersects with other social relations. Perhaps the most important contribution of postmodernist inquiry to the history of sexuality and gender has been its insistence on the intersectionality of all social relations. As Butler states, “the analysis of racialization and class is at least equally important in the thinking of sexuality as either gender or homosexuality, and these last two are not separable from more complex and complicitous formations of power.”<sup>64</sup> An important focus of this thesis will therefore be the connections between the sexual subjectivities of the women discussed herein and their social positioning in other terms.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

Most studies of lesbian and gay culture and identity acknowledge as a significant influence or as a point of departure Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, and particularly his emphasis of the constructed rather than essential nature of sexuality. It is worth discussing Foucault in some depth here, since his insights into the construction of sexuality have direct bearing on my analysis. Although I agree with Foucault that identities based on sexual orientation are a recent phenomenon, and that sexuality is socially constructed, I also acknowledge that—even if identities in an individual change over time—identity can *feel*

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<sup>63</sup> *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Story of Lesbian Lives*, Lynn Fernie & Aerlyn Weissman, dir., National Film Board of Canada, 1992.

<sup>64</sup> Judith Butler, “Against Proper Objects,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6.2, 3 (1994), 21.

essential and inherent. Moreover, in a society constructed on the basis of identity labels, when one feels oneself to have one of the proscribed identities, self-identification, community formation, and political resistance understandably often take the form of a passionate and necessary identity standpoint.

This dissertation will argue that, even though sexual orientation may be socially constructed, lesbian women who grew up and experienced same-sex desires before 1965 usually construct their life stories as linear narratives arriving at the point of realization of a stable, fixed, and essential identity. Even those who came out only recently, but who identify early attractions towards other females, construct narratives with essential identities at their heart. Those identities are important in their sense of self, since they place the women firmly and positively in historical contexts.

It is in his assessment of the increasing sexual classification of individuals that Foucault is most useful for this dissertation. In his introduction to *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, Foucault argues that the emergence of biological theories of sexuality led gradually to the dominance of the idea that an individual had one and only one true sex.<sup>65</sup> The same tendency for science and society to classify individuals according to one true biological sex was also true, particularly in the early twentieth century, in relation to sexual orientation. Women and men were classified and socially organized in relation to the biological “facts” of their sex, and were then further classified and organized in terms of whether or not the uses they made of their biological sex conformed to concepts of “appropriate” sexuality. Even if conforming to “appropriate” sexuality in the heterosexual nature of the sex act, a heterosexual person was classifiable by the productivity or non-productivity of their sexuality. Masturbation, sodomy, and prostitution were classified

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<sup>65</sup> Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), viii.

negatively because of the “wastage” of sexuality in non-reproductive forms. So too was homosexuality.

### **“Identity,” “Subjectivity,” and “Sex”**

The increasing tendency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to attribute negative behaviours to genetic degeneration confirmed in the eyes of many that both appropriate and inappropriate sexuality were related to and evidence of the “true” nature of the individual. Sexual behaviour was an external expression of an innate characteristic, and conclusions could be reached about who or what a person *was* based on what sexual behaviours and gender performance they manifested. Among “hereditarian” eugenicists in particular, sexual deviance of any kind was regarded as an inherited biological attribute, rather than as a sinful choice. Those who might more appropriately be described as “environmentalists,” even though they accorded social context at least some role in the formation of an individual, also tended to see sexual deviance in terms very close to hereditarian ones. Even if deviant behaviours were learned rather than innate ones, they became fixed to the individual in a way that implied permanence and stability over time.

Biological theories supported heterosexual hegemony, in that heterosexuality remained the ideal, the norm, and the assumed “truth” of most in society, but they also—perhaps unwittingly—supported the claims of non-heterosexuals for freedom from prosecution and persecution. For if sexual orientation were a biological attribute, and if sexual behaviour merely the outward expression of the true, biological nature of the individual, then non-heterosexual people were no more responsible for their sexual orientation than were heterosexual people. It is in this first expression of sexual “truth” that one sees the emergence of what would later become identities of sexual orientation. It must be acknowledged, however, that the majority in society, even if agreeing with biological arguments about sexual orientation, preserved a hierarchy in which heterosexuality remained the ideal against which all other sexualities would be judged.

The emphasis on the one “true” sexuality can be seen most clearly in attitudes towards and control of homosexual and bisexual behaviours. The creation of the categories “homosexual,” “bisexual,” and “heterosexual” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflects the growing concern with separating individuals on the basis of the sexual uses made of their biological sex, and the attribution to these differing behaviours of negative and positive characteristics.<sup>66</sup> In the era of sexology and Freud, classification of individuals on the basis of their supposed “true” sexual orientation became increasingly common, and one could even speak of a “repressed” sexuality. These systems of classification relied on the assumption that sexuality is static, a basic aspect of genetics and/or personality that cannot usually be changed, which may be repressed but will always result in some outward behaviour, and which therefore should be the focus of medical and bureaucratic classification, monitoring and control.

In the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first, differing opinions have often been expressed about whether sexualities should be called “orientations” or “preferences.” The former implies rather greater essentialism and a biological basis, whereas the latter implies choice. Whether sexuality was innate or chosen was also a topic of debate in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For those individuals who were aware that their desires were not for the opposite sex, the emergence of a biological discourse was an important factor in the construction of sexual subjectivities and in the formation of same-sex communities.

As will be shown in this dissertation, those women who experienced and explored sexual desires for other women between 1910 and 1965 did so in relation to an increasingly essentialist discourse that both defined them in negative terms as abnormal and simultaneously provided them with a language with which to define themselves in positive and affirming ways. As a consequence, their narratives are most often phrased in the essentialist terms of the discourse

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<sup>66</sup> Bert Hansen recounts the formulation of these categories and their gradual spread to North America in “American Physicians’ ‘Discovery’ of Homosexuals, 1880-1900: A New Diagnosis in a Changing Society,” in *Framing Disease: Studies in Cultural History* eds. Charles Rosenberg and Janet Golden (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

used so pejoratively about them. They speak of their sexuality as the truth of their nature, as something they have always been and which they had to “discover.” In recognition of the importance of biological arguments for the women whose stories are examined here, I have chosen to use the term “sexual orientation” to describe their sexuality, reflecting as it does their belief that their sexuality is not a choice.

Historical scholarship on sexuality has often tended to use the classifications of and structure debate around the supposedly “given” groups that result from biological arguments: heterosexual women, men and reproduction; prostitutes, lesbians and gay men. This has led to a particularization and segregation of the histories of these groups. Lesbian and gay histories, which began to emerge in the late 1970s and the 1980s, have tended until recently to assume a lesbian or gay experience unified primarily by sexual activity. While lesbians and gay men have perhaps been rather too keen to apply modern identity labels uncritically backwards in time—resulting in inaccurate claims of Greek pederastic relationships being “gay” and of Sappho being “lesbian”, for example—and have managed to “find” lesbians and gay men everywhere, many heterosexual historians have discounted suggestions of same-sex relationships in history and have demanded more stringent proofs of non-heterosexual behaviours than of heterosexual ones. In both cases, proof of homosexuality is a key issue.

A number of historians and theorists have attempted to grapple with the question of proof of sexual orientation or identity, with varying degrees of success. It is the histories of lesbian and bisexual women which provide us with the thorniest problems of definition and examination. Those of us working with women’s sources are always faced with the limits of their availability and their scope, and indeed with the problem of making generalizations from them. Finding what appears to be evidence of sexual exploration with other women, one must prove that this constituted queer *identity*, the requirement for which is that the female subject must have used in relation to herself one of the several words which we recognize as connoting lesbianism or bisexuality. There is very great resistance in women’s history to the attribution of the words

“lesbian” or “bisexual” to women in the past, the implication being that, unless they used such a word themselves, they would find that attribution offensive. This resistance says more about the homophobia of women’s history than anything else for, as Sheila Jeffreys has commented, we cannot assume that the ascription of a lesbian identity would have been offensive to women in the past. It is her contention that such an argument “assumes that a lesbian identity is of itself shameful; a view not held by lesbians now and not one which should be imputed to women in the past.”<sup>67</sup>

If one were to agree that the word “lesbian” cannot be applied to women in the past unless they themselves used it, then a number of the narrators in this study could not be said to have been lesbian until after they heard the term expressed in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of the women in this study explored their sexuality with other women without having any identity labels with which to describe it and did not begin to use those labels until lesbian-feminism made them more widely known. Are they then to be excluded from a history of lesbianism, because they were not yet in possession of a discourse with which to describe it? I agree that, in most cases, it would not be appropriate to describe these women as having lesbian *identities* in the period under discussion, but I believe it legitimate to discuss their having lesbian desires and subjectivities.

An identity category involves several things. In the case of marginalized groups, such as lesbians and bisexuals, an identity involves clear and sustained boundaries between oneself and the broader society, and a minority status shared with others.<sup>68</sup> A community based on identity has its own cultural norms of behaviour and clearly-defined boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. An identity is also often, but not always, taken to refer to a fixed and stable essence in

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<sup>67</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, "Does It Matter If They Did It?", 23.

<sup>68</sup> That awareness of minority status may include a shared feeling of disadvantage or oppression and a politicized voicing of that feeling, but it may be as simple as being aware that one’s identity group forms a numerical minority within society.

the individual. While an individual may hold multiple identities at one time, it is generally assumed in identity politics that each of those identities relates to an innate part of the individual. Although they now speak of themselves in identity-driven terms and construct their narratives as journeys towards the realization of an identity, most lacked, before 1965, crucial elements of identity. Most were not aware of identity categories and did not name themselves in any of the emerging terms. Many had no idea that there were others in the world who shared same-sex attractions. Even most of those who did know that there were others like themselves did not necessarily think in terms of a unified group, defined and distinguished from others by their same-sex attractions.

I shall instead use the term “subjectivity” throughout this dissertation. By subjectivity I mean a sense of self in relation to the world. Subjectivity is “the particular way that an individual becomes a social person, part and product of the corner of the world she or he inhabits.”<sup>69</sup> Subjectivities are formed in relation to historical and social contexts. This is, of course, an element in identity too, but an identity is formed around a single construct, such as sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or gender, even if one may hold several identities at once and those identities may contradict each other. When referring to lesbians or to bisexual women, I shall be referring to behaviours and desires foremost, and, in the case of many of the women discussed in this dissertation, an awareness of difference, of attraction to other women, and of the desire to be in relationships and communities with other women with the same desires. A lesbian or bisexual subjectivity will not, then, in the terms of this study, refer necessarily to the use of any of the identity labels which came to predominate in the twentieth century. The present work asks which aspects of their subjectivities women made visible and which they did not, and seeks to illustrate the events and historical contexts which informed the construction of

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<sup>69</sup> Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 13.

those subjectivities. This is a study of “the cultural forms and processes by which [these] individuals express their sense of themselves in history.”<sup>70</sup>

Catherine Hall argues that subjectivity is best understood “through a process of differentiation, division and splitting in the individual, which is never finished or complete...[t]he formation of subjectivity [is] an ever-unfinished process, one that inevitably involves psychic conflict and antagonism, and one that is fundamentally unstable, but always has historical conditions of existence.”<sup>71</sup> I regard sexual subjectivity as formed by precisely this fragmentary process, which places even those women who seem most to conform to prevailing gender and sexual norms in a constant state of “psychic conflict” as they negotiate a dialogue between the dominant discourses of sexuality and their own discourses which may act in contradistinction to them.

As Nan Enstad comments, “subjectivity emphasizes a *process* of becoming that is never completed. It is based on the premise that *who one is* is neither essential nor fixed, but is continually shaped and reshaped in human social exchange.”<sup>72</sup> That social exchange includes the writing of community histories. It has become apparent in my investigation of the narrators’ lives that the identity category “lesbian” has within it two further identity categories for the period under study: the “romantic friend” and the “butch” or “femme” lesbian. These forms of lesbianism were important in lesbian experience before the rise of the homophile movement and of lesbian-feminism. They have their basis in lived experience, to be sure, but they are also the two main categories by which lesbians and historians have understood, defined, and analysed lesbian history, to the exclusion of other possibilities.

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<sup>70</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), ix.

<sup>71</sup> Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 22.

<sup>72</sup> Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, 13.

Nan Enstad suggests, writing about young working women at the turn of the century, that the subjectivities of the women she discusses have been obscured by two things: “contemporary organized politics and historical analyses, both of which searched for political actors who matched preconceived cultural ideals.”<sup>73</sup> She further suggests that historians, motivated to restore stories of women’s activism to the historical record, actually “narrowed the historical understanding of the diversity of working-class culture and resistance, and foreclosed alternate political subjectivities by the ways they framed their subjects and sources.”<sup>74</sup>

Enstad’s argument about working women is applicable to the stories of the narrators for this study. Both during the period under study and subsequently, the subjectivities of lower middle-class lesbians have been made culturally unintelligible by discourses of sexual orientation and by lesbians’ and historians’ desire to restore to the historical narrative the stories of the foremothers of lesbian community and activism. Throughout the nineteenth and during much of the twentieth century, same-sex relationships between women were defined and understood in relation to two main stereotypes: noble, allegedly non-sexual, and socially sanctioned middle-class “romantic friendships,” and gender-transgressive, sexualized, and pathologized “butch-femme” relationships defined and policed by sexologists, psychologists, and the medical profession. These norms offered but two alternatives for lesbian experience.

The desire on the part of both the lesbian community and lesbian historians to locate and celebrate the origins of lesbian community has tended to emphasize these two forms of lesbianism at the expense of other experiences and possibilities. The tendency has been to look for those women who lived openly in relationships with other women, whether in those romantic friendships assumed to be non-sexual or in the public lesbian bar culture in postwar cities, and to see these women as the courageous foremothers of lesbian feminists and lesbian communities in

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<sup>73</sup> Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, 51.

<sup>74</sup> Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, 117-118.

the late twentieth century. In focusing on the openness with which these women lived without men, and in celebrating that as the essential feature of lesbian experience, lesbians have all too often ignored and made unintelligible the subjectivities of those lesbians who did not live openly as lesbians, were not political matriarchs of the nation,<sup>75</sup> and did not fight for public space.<sup>76</sup>

While “unpolitical” forms of lesbianism are occasionally recognized, they are often portrayed negatively as “closeted,” a strategy both dismissive of their own personal struggles and reifying of the dominant modes of celebration of lesbianism in the past. There exists no celebratory rubric under which to describe their experiences and their contribution to lesbian history. Unlike romantic friends and butch/femme couples, they have no identity category of their own within lesbianism. Their lesbianism is amorphous, undefined. Because they were not in some way recognizable political actors or literary figures, they do not feature as culturally intelligible within lesbian discourse itself. It is one of the tasks of this study to remedy that erasure from lesbian history.

The above discussion has relevance for all sexualities. As certainly as “queer” sexualities are made culturally unintelligible by social norms and institutions (including history and lesbian-feminism), so too are heterosexual subjectivities which do not fit absolutely within the confines of “ideal” heterosexuality disqualified by the discursive regimes of sexual “truths.” While less proscribed than other sexualities, heterosexuality is nevertheless constantly undermined by its own imperfections. Sexuality, as witnessed in its external manifestations, its internal negotiations, and its continual and insistent speaking out, is at once the thing one must know and the thing one cannot know.

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<sup>75</sup> Unlike the lesbians discussed in Lillian Faderman’s latest work, *To Believe in Women*.

<sup>76</sup> Unlike those discussed in Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*: and Elise Chenier, “Tough Ladies and Troublemakers.”

But how do we find the thing we cannot know? Martha Vicinus brings to us the very useful idea of the “not said” and the “not seen” as conceptual tools.<sup>77</sup> While literary theorists know well the importance of silences, spaces, pauses and absences, historians have dealt rather less well with what is neither said nor seen in the historical records, resting as we do so firmly on empirical proof, on what can be observed and measured. Much of the sexual activity of our historical subjects is neither spoken about by them nor seen by their contemporaries.

I argue in this dissertation in favour of using the “not said” and the “not seen” as conceptual tools, but perhaps rather differently than Vicinus. In addition to the sex we know to have occurred, using our current definitions, we should examine modes of behaviour that histories of fertility, sodomy, gross indecency, rape and venereal disease largely ignore. This will require seeing non-penetrative acts of human sexual expression as “sex” rather than as “foreplay,” and seeing as a valid category of analysis and definition the concept of desire and its construction. Reading across the grain of women’s historical sources, I argue that the fact that most of these women did not speak or write the names “lesbian” or “bisexual” about themselves need not mean that we cannot understand their histories using these terms, provided we do not use the terms to refer to identities in the late twentieth-century, politicized sense. Most of the narrators interviewed for this dissertation did not use such terms about themselves before 1965 and yet use them now to describe the subjectivities they see as having formed in them from childhood. Perhaps, with caution, we can take their lead and apply the same terms backwards in time to other women who did not use them, yet whose behaviours and desires bear a striking resemblance to those of the narrators.

I shall also suggest that we need to read written sources from the early twentieth century with an eye to what is neither said nor seen. The absence of written evidence of genital sexuality between women does not mean that it did not occur. Given the reluctance of the period

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<sup>77</sup> Martha Vicinus, “Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?” *Radical History Review* 60 (Fall 1994), 57-75.

regarding the expression of sexual matters, one would not expect genital sexuality to be discussed in private documents such as journals and letters, which might be picked up and read by someone not intended to read them. But even in the proven absence of a genital sexuality, I would suggest that we view what counts as “sex” more flexibly so as to recognize that these women went far beyond what was regarded as normal and heterosexual. Their degree of physical intimacy with one another, regardless of any genital aspects, would have been sufficient to cause suspicion. Even in an era in which women did sometimes sleep together in the same bed, the frequency with which some of these women slept together, evidence of their being very familiar with each other’s bodies, and evidence of flirtation should suggest to us that these were not merely friends. That being the case, we can surely posit that these women had same-sex desires and physical relationships based on those desires.

This dissertation uses diaries, correspondence and oral testimonies to examine lesbian and bisexual women’s sexuality in the period 1910-1965. Whereas the study of sexuality in English-speaking Canada has thus far revealed much about the efforts of governments, the medical profession, the church, and individuals in reform organizations to control both the amount and type of information about sexuality available to the public and the mode of expression of sexuality, little is known about Canadian women’s sexual self-identification. How did lesbian and bisexual women in Canada understand their sexuality, and in what ways did they interact with the dominant discourses concerning sex?

### **The Spreading Depths**

This dissertation is structured very much in the same way that the subjects of the study constructed their narratives, beginning with the historical contexts of their lives and an analysis of their childhoods and young adolescent years. The text then moves through themes relating to the events and structural connections the narrators identify as important in their subjectivity:

physical attractions towards and sexual activity with other girls or women; community relations and social life; romantic relationships; and relationships with family. In each of the chapters I draw connections between particular events in the women's lives and changes in their subjectivities. In the case of the written sources, I infer from textual references the nature of the women's sexual subjectivities.

In Chapter One I analyse the various "public" discourses regarding sexuality in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada. These include discourses arising from religious, reform, scientific and governmental sources. I demonstrate the interconnectedness of these discourses, and discuss their origins and international implications. While seemingly in competition for control of sexuality, the interests of science, religion and government coalesced in a group of strategies for the hegemonic domination of sexual subjects. These ideas were promulgated through a variety of media, organizations and individuals, and were aimed at reaching women, men and children of all classes. Particular attention is given in this chapter to the availability of these discourses to the women whose diaries and interviews form much of the primary foundation of the dissertation, in the schooling they received as children, from their parents, in the books, magazines, and newspapers they read, and from the individuals and organizations, governmental and otherwise, to which they were exposed.

Chapter Two examines the childhoods, adolescent years, and young adulthoods of many of the women whose histories are the focus of this study.<sup>78</sup> I examine their backgrounds and the values with which they were raised, focusing particularly on their inculcation into heteronormativity. Born at dates ranging from 1913 to 1948, the narrators were privy to major changes in understandings of and policies governing sexuality before 1965. Those women whose written sources are examined were born even earlier, at the turn of the century. All the women were well aware of the norms regarding gender and relationships between the sexes.

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<sup>78</sup> Not all the women's lives are examined in Chapter Two, as not all the narrators were able to remember or were forthcoming with details about their childhoods.

Most were completely unaware when they were growing up of alternatives to the normative lifestyle offered up as their destiny.

The evidence discussed in Chapter Three suggests that we need to re-evaluate the criteria for judging the existence and the nature of lesbianism and female bisexuality. The argument, made by Faderman and others, that women in the pre-Freudian era were unlikely to have explored a genital sexuality with each other implies that a behaviour cannot occur in the absence of publicly-available information about it. I argue in this chapter that historians assume too little knowledge and exploration on the part of their female subjects. A careful reading of sources phrased in the language of the romantic friendship suggests that many of these middle-class couples did have physical relationships, although we may never know whether or not they were genital ones.

Conversely, when discussing women of the twentieth century, during which an increasing volume of sexual information became available to the public, we must also be careful not to assume *too much* knowledge. Chapter Three shows that little information was available to the narrators on the subject of sexuality; most realized their desires through exploration and experimentation. The testimonies show that women engaged in a wide range of sexual practices with other women, from vaginal penetration with or without dildos, to fondling and sleeping together, all without having been told about the pleasures of the female body.

Chapter Four examines female same-sex relationships between 1910 and 1965, focusing particularly on the ways in which women established and maintained relationships and expressed their feelings for one another. I show that the school and the workplace were important sites for the formation of relationships between women, providing as they did numerous opportunities for same-sex social contacts, the like of which disappeared for many heterosexual women upon marriage. Through these contacts, women formed both brief and long-term relationships with each other, sometimes living relatively openly within a lesbian community, but often living very closeted lives in the presence of heterosexuals.

Chapter Four addresses the nature of same-sex relationships, and argues that relationships between women were often phrased in the same terms as heterosexual relationships, in that the discourse of courtship held sway in lesbian communities as it did in heterosexual ones. The nature of emotional intimacy between women is discussed in this chapter, as is the issue of gender roles between partners. Also addressed is the presence of abuse in lesbian relationships, and the intolerance towards bisexual women in the community.

Throughout the twentieth century, women who were attracted to other women had to balance their desires, and the wish to explore those desires physically, with the need to maintain happy relationships with their families of origin. One might expect such relationships to be fraught with tension and difficulty for the women concerned, but this was not always the case. Chapter Four contends that separation from family because of lesbianism was actually rather rare in the period from 1910 to 1965. Many lesbians growing up and forming relationships between 1910 and 1965 remained close to their families, with sexuality forming a site of conflict but not of irrevocable division. I argue here that, in many cases, lesbians before 1965 had stronger ties to their families of origin than would those who came out in the 1970s into the lesbian movement.

Chapter Five explores the different communities of lesbians and bisexual women in Canada from 1910 to 1965, from small groups of middle-class friends in the early part of the century who shared a “devotion” to other women, to the working-class and public bar scene of downtown Toronto in the 1940s and 1950s, to the “respectable” house-parties of thirty to fifty women held in more suburban areas. In all of these cases, women formed friendships and social networks based on their same-sex desires. While this is not lesbian or bisexual community in the modern, political sense, it did provide women with the sense that they were not alone, that they shared their attractions to women with others, and that they could find at least a few people in the world with whom they could express who they were. This is, I argue, community. For some women in this study, the Canadian military provided an arena for the formation of lesbian

community, especially in the form of sports teams on the bases. The risks of this kind of community membership are revealed in the testimonies of those women who left the military before they could be dishonourably discharged because of their lesbianism.

As I demonstrate in this chapter, the lesbian community in Canada, as elsewhere, was clearly divided along lines of class. I compare the social world of lower middle-class lesbians with the bar culture of poor, working-class lesbians and with middle-class lesbian social networks. There existed in Canada a substantial middle-class lesbian world outside the universities, government departments and public welfare organizations on the one hand, and the downtown bars on the other. That social world has, until now, remained unexplored. Here I chart the importance of house parties in lower middle-class lesbian life, and I assess the bar as a literal and symbolic boundary between “respectable” and “rough” lesbians and argue that respectability and distance from bar life were key elements in the self-identification of this group of lesbian women.

Throughout these chapters is an analysis of the importance of these elements—childhood, attractions, sexual activity, formation of relationships, community, and relationships with family—in the formation of lesbian or bisexual subjectivities. The interviews conducted for this study, combined with the written records used, demonstrate that the women’s subjectivities altered during the period under study, and that a changing sense of self in relation to sexual orientation was part of that alteration. Few used identity labels about themselves during the period in question, most coming to those terms and the ideas associated with them much later, after feminism had made the terminology both more accessible and less pathological.

Those few women who had heard the words “lesbian” and “bisexual” in the period under study did not, for the most part, apply the words to themselves, feeling that the terms’ pathological emphasis did not relate to their personal experiences and feelings. Instead, many of them were aware that they were different, and that they were attracted to women, but they did not use an identity label with which to name their desire. Nevertheless, most of the narrators for

this study construct their narratives as journeys of struggle towards the eventual realization of a lesbian identity. Many can identify feelings they had as children which, in hindsight if not at the time, persuaded them that they were attracted to girls rather than boys, women rather than men. Many of the narrators acted on those feelings when they were quite young and remember those experiences as more satisfying, intense, and “natural” than their heterosexual contacts.

The formation of the first same-sex relationship in a woman’s life was often described in terms of its “rightness” and “naturalness”. The finding of community among other women like themselves, whether during or after the period under study, led to further reshaping of the ways in which these women described their sexual subjectivity. In the affirmation of common experience, they were able to view their sexuality differently and to begin to use new words to describe it, words that increasingly expressed its stability, its certainty, and its inherently positive nature.

In a sense, whether these women’s sexuality is inherent or socially constructed is irrelevant. The narratives discussed in this study suggest an essentialist position in which sexual orientation is an inherent and stable characteristic of the individual. These are precisely the terms with which sexuality has been understood for the past century at least. Moreover, an emphasis on the rightness, the naturalness, and the stability of sexual orientation has been essential for the formation of communities among lesbians, gay men, and, more recently, bisexuals. Only recently have some bisexuals and some who would refer to themselves as “queer” rather than as lesbian or gay argued for alliances based on wider diversity and mutability than essentialism allows.

In the period under study, and in the important period of gay and lesbian rights campaigning in the late 1960s and the 1970s, arguing from an identity position was fundamental to the obtaining of civil rights for lesbians and gay men, and for the obtaining of increased recognition and tolerance from the heterosexual community. Even a social constructionist analysis must therefore acknowledge that the narrative structure used by the women in this study

was the most coherent and the most powerful discourse they could have used in their construction of subjectivity and in the establishment of the communities we all benefit from today. Without these linear and progressive narratives with which these and other women structured their lives, lesbians, gays, and bisexuals might not have today the choice to be “queer”

## CHAPTER ONE

### **A Moral Framework: Dominant Discourses of Sexuality in English Canada, 1910-1965.**

Sexual mores are not created in a social vacuum, but rather are the product of tensions among a multiplicity of cultural, social and economic forces. In the rapidly-changing arena of English Canada in the early twentieth century, sexual mores moved further away from the “Victorian” precepts which had governed sexuality since the eighteenth century. In the new, urbanizing, and industrializing countries of the world, sexuality became increasingly subject to the hegemony of science and psychology, which both competed with and reinforced prevailing gender and sexual norms. Canadian sexual norms underwent a significant shift between 1900 and 1965; although remaining restrictive of sexual expression, Canadian society increasingly reflected the twentieth-century “Western” approach to sexuality as a human behaviour which was natural and yet dangerous, needing the proper guidance of experts to ensure its safe and moral expression.

In order to appreciate the degree to which lesbians and bisexual women growing up in Canada between 1910 and 1965 had to construct their subjectivity in an environment hostile to non-heterosexual forms of sexuality, it is first necessary to outline the dominant sexual mores of the period. It is not sufficient simply to regard the early twentieth century as a period of restriction of homosexuality and bisexuality, for during the decades before lesbian feminism and the gay rights movement there were opportunities for lesbians and bisexual women to meet others like themselves and to form relationships based on same-sex attraction. Many of the women in this study, even though they grew up in the heterosexually-defined and homophobic environment to be outlined in this chapter, experienced sexual attraction towards women, although few could put a name to it until later in the century. They were able to do so because dominant discourses could be somewhat ignored, misread and misheard, given “perverse” readings, resisted and otherwise re-shaped by individuals in Canadian society. Even those views most hostile to same-sex desire were

not necessarily hegemonic. Spaces, gaps and fissures could be found in dominant discourses to allow alternative sexualities to survive, if not flourish.

In this chapter, I provide the historical framework for the chapters which follow. Analysis of the construction of the subjectivities of the women in this study will demonstrate that subjectivity developed in relation and in reaction to the oppressive gender relations of the early to mid twentieth century, to the dearth of information available to the general public on sexuality, and on homosexuality in particular, and to the specific events and human interactions of these women's lives. Their stories are tales of triumph over adversity and ignorance, of the awakening of a true self and of the willingness to be true to that self in the midst of homophobia. The task of this chapter, then, is to outline the context within which these women formed their subjectivities.

This chapter will examine the social and political forces which determined the nature of, and responses to, female sexuality in Canada between 1910 and 1965. The first section will examine the definition and policing of that form of sexuality deemed “normal” and ideal: heterosexuality. It was heterosexual norms with which the women in this study were raised and to which they conformed to varying degrees. Normative gender is also explored in this first section, as gender was and remains intimately linked with sexuality. The latter half of the chapter examines the development of sexological and psychological attitudes towards homosexuality, and to lesbianism in particular, and their spread to Canadian society as a whole. In particular, this chapter tracks the changes in acceptance of relationships between women, from the romantic friendships of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the butch-femme bar culture of the 1950s and 1960s. When considering how women formed sexual subjectivities before 1965, and why, at the turn of the twenty-first century, they construct their narratives in linear and essentialist ways, it is necessary to understand the particular social and political circumstances influencing them.

The English Canada of the early to mid-twentieth century was, in some ways, markedly different from that of the preceding century. Urbanization and industrialization created new social tensions in some areas—tensions which were played out in social conflicts over immigration,

welfare, the treatment of those considered to be mentally or morally “defective,” temperance, gender roles and sexual behaviour. The twentieth century became in these years the century of the “expert”: the scientist, professional, or administrator whose specialized training instilled in him (or her) the authority to define, delimit and regulate behaviour in all areas of society.

This is not to suggest that Canadian society was subject to the despotism of an authoritarian state. As Mariana Valverde has demonstrated, in many ways the state was considered rather weak by those most invested in the regulation of behaviour.<sup>79</sup> Moral regulation, and most particularly the regulation of sexuality, was the province both of the state and of civil society. It was through the work of numerous voluntary organizations, religious groups and reform activists that Canadian society received the dubious wisdom of a fearful and powerful middle class, whose concerns about “race degeneration” and urban decay fuelled a new reform era. Early twentieth-century English Canada was at war with itself over issues profoundly influenced by gender and sexuality—sexuality was both the site of moral and physical decay and the conduit through which bourgeois regulation could be achieved.

The origins of twentieth-century norms of sexual behaviour can be traced at least as far back as the turn of the nineteenth century. The nineteenth-century idealization of genteel, middle-class womanhood, despite its obvious disparity with most women’s experience, was nevertheless the paradigm by which society constructed gender and sexual relations until the First World War. While the entry of women into the work force and changing attitudes about the sexual double standard necessarily caused reinterpretation of this paradigm, its influence remained pervasive in social and moral regulation. The realities of women’s lives changed more rapidly than did the standards by which women were judged.

“Separate spheres” had its origins in the England and Europe of the eighteenth century. The association of women with the private sphere of the home, and of men with the outside world

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<sup>79</sup> Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 25.

of work and politics, is understood to have emerged in association with the growth of capitalism, industrialization, and the development of the middle class. This process was a slow one, varying as it did by locality: in urban areas, the home became more quickly separated from the workplace, the site of economic production. The home, and therefore the wife, became the symbol of virtue, cleanliness, and familial affection.

It is beyond the scope of the present work to examine the sexual division of labour as it was manifest in gender relationships in England and Canada. Suffice it to say that there appears always to have been a sexual division of labour; industrial capitalism merely reinforced and institutionalized existing divisions. The sexual division of labour became more clearly hierarchical, with the outside world of men's paid labour having greater status and economic reward than the unpaid labour of the home and family. The boundaries between men's and women's spheres became more rigidly demarcated and were naturalized by ideological constructions which posited their biological basis. Women were equated with passivity, spirituality, lower intellectual capacity, biological weakness, emotional instability, and nurturing; men were rational, intelligent, active, stronger, and the driving force of the nation. The personal prestige of a man was dependent upon his being able to support a wife and children economically, without requiring them to take paid employment. The ideal, of course, was that a man's wife should not even have to perform the dirty labour within the home, work more properly performed by servants.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> For an analysis of the gender ideology of separate spheres, see: Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1950* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A review of the categories and chronologies of English women's history." *Historical Journal* 36 (1993), 383-414; Ramsay Cook and Wendy Mitchinson, *The Proper Sphere: Woman's Place in Canadian Society* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976); and Wendy Mitchinson, *The Nature of Their Bodies*.

It is axiomatic that not all women could attain the life demanded by the separate spheres ideal. Working-class women were excluded from the ideal of refined womanliness by the economic necessity for their paid employment outside the home. They had also to perform the unpaid domestic work for their own families. Indeed, the very notion of separate spheres rested upon its exclusion of the vast majority of women, who were required to maintain the class which made it hegemonic. Even those who achieved the ideal sometimes found it stifling, however, and used its precepts to expand the perimeters of their domestic sphere. Arguing that their “natural” role as mothers as moral guides made them ideal reformers of social ills, some women entered public lives as moral reformers, educators, and later as politicians.<sup>81</sup>

Separate spheres ideology found modified expression in the Canadian setting. In a nation whose population remained largely rural until the twentieth century, and in which industrialization provided only sporadic employment for many men, most women had to perform at least some labour. Many had therefore to work outside the home, in the world deemed unsuitable for women which, in the eyes of middle-class Canadian society, increased the risk of women’s downfall through sexual promiscuity.

While the portrayal of the Victorian era as uniformly repressive and prudish is an erroneous one, it is nevertheless true that the nineteenth century was exemplified by at least the *appearance* of sexual restraint as its defining characteristic. Early Victorian roles of gender and sexuality, especially for women, were determined by the idealization of genteel womanhood and a sexual double standard. The Victorian sexual double standard, as it has come to be known, held that men were sexually active, possessed of intense sexual appetites which could not be contained. Men

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<sup>81</sup> Several works discuss the use of separate spheres ideology to justify the entry of women into public life. The arguments of such “maternal feminists” are examined, for example, in Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, class, and the state* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) and Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments*. For Canada, see Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water* and Carol Lee Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred?*

were initially expected to be sexually active at a young age and even before marriage. Given the limits placed on acceptable sexual expression within marriage, it was regarded as understandable that men should seek sexual outlets with prostitutes. This tolerance of male sexuality decreased towards the end of the century, however, and it became *de rigueur* to urge men to suppress sexual appetite in the interests of moral and physical health.<sup>82</sup>

Women, it was believed, had smaller sexual appetites. Doctors of the nineteenth century could not confirm the reasons for this greater passivity on the part of women, but hypotheses ranged from a biological need to conserve vital energy for reproduction, to a balancing of the sexual desires of the more robust man and the respectable woman, to women's greater spirituality.<sup>83</sup> Because women's sexual passions were assumed to be small, or even non-existent, and it was therefore thought that sexual feelings had to be aroused in women by their husbands (and in moderation only), those women who did manifest an unusual interest in sexuality were condemned. Whereas men were not blamed for sexual "excess," occurring as it did because of their innately stronger sexual drives, women were blamed if they had "fallen" from sexual grace.<sup>84</sup>

In Canada, the sexual double standard held sway particularly in relation to the subject of appropriate and inappropriate female sexuality. Historian Karen Dubinsky has shown, in *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929*, that laws relating to seduction and abduction of women were based upon a double standard which held that men and women had oppositional sexual natures. The prosecution of seduction and abduction, types of voluntary sexual activity, involved the invoking of two stereotypes about the sexual behaviour of women which had

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<sup>82</sup> Lesley Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900-1950* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 15-32.

<sup>83</sup> Wendy Mitchinson, *The Nature of Their Bodies*, 106.

<sup>84</sup> The treatment of prostitutes is a clear example of the double standard in action. See, for example, Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*.

their origins in the sexual double standard: the “maidenly girl” and the “designing woman.”<sup>85</sup> Women’s ability to persuade the courts that they had been seduced rested upon their ability to prove that they were maidenly rather than designing, a challenge indeed within a system which presumed moral guilt on the part of any woman who had sexual relations before marriage, even had marriage been promised to them.<sup>86</sup>

The consequences of women’s sexual autonomy were, it was thought, national and catastrophic in nature. The control of sexuality remained a crucial part of all Canadian reform legislation, whether relating to the structure of the urban environment, public health, education, public recreation, or provincial and state welfare assistance. Sex, and by implication the sexuality of women, was a key to the interlocking mechanisms of gender, class, race and religion. Sex held the future of the race in its grasp. As Valverde suggests, “The links between sexual excess, mental and moral degeneration, and the decline of the nation were made repeatedly.”<sup>87</sup>

Because of the importance placed on sex and on women in the saving of the race from degeneration, the consequences for women of “inappropriate” sexual behaviour were drastic: social approbation was denied, respectability destroyed, financial aid withdrawn, and rights to children negated. Extreme forms of unacceptable sexuality, such as prostitution, were assumed to result in consequences that those in power felt were justified—the wages of sin were public disapproval and even death.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances*, 64-65.

<sup>86</sup> Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances*, 72-73.

<sup>87</sup> Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water*, 106.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example: Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances*; Susan Johnston, “Twice Slain.”; and Carolyn Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem*. An analysis of the consequences thought likely to befall the wayward, and especially wayward women, can be found in Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Sander Gilman, in *Difference and Pathology: stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), shows clearly that the linking of images of pathology and immorality has a long history in European culture.

Religion remained an important influence in English-Canadian society. Although some historians suggest that the moral and social reformers were eventually responsible for the creation of a secular society, the process of secularization of Canadian society remains a matter of debate.<sup>89</sup> Whether adding to the process of secularization or slowing it down, moral reformers saw themselves and their work in Christian terms, and religious language permeated reform discourse. And for many Christians, sexuality was something which stirred profound ambivalence. In all the Christian denominations, sexual intercourse was permitted only in limited circumstances: heterosexual sex within marriage, with penile-vaginal penetration occurring with the woman on her back and the man in what has become known as the “missionary position.” Other positions were not acceptable. Anal intercourse, oral sex, masturbation, same-gender sex, sex with animals, heterosexual intercourse outside marriage and incest were all regarded as acts against God and Nature.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> On the subject of religion in Canadian society, see Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985); Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992); David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989); Lynne Marks, “The ‘Hallelujah Lasses’: Working-Class Women in the Salvation Army in English Canada, 1882-92,” *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women’s History*, 2nd ed., ed. Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1991), 182-205; Neil Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996); Terrence Murphy & Roberto Perin, eds., *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

<sup>90</sup> The proscription against non-reproductive and non-marital forms of sexuality preceded the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by a considerable length of time, arising as it did from Christian and Jewish precepts. For a discussion of the history of such attitudes within European societies, see Vern Bullough, *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

The single most important demarcation of acceptable and unacceptable sexuality was, then, whether or not it was procreative. What was not uniform among the denominations, nor between individuals, was any single belief about the moral correctness of intercourse within marriage for enjoyment rather than expressly for procreation. According to some views, any sexual activity not entered into for the express purpose of conception was inherently sinful. For others, however, and particularly as ideas of the companionate marriage began to merge with acceptance of the mutual physical desires of husband and wife, “normal” sexual intercourse within marriage had pleasure as well as procreation as its focus.

For most Christians, the family was the cornerstone of society: the Christian family provided at once an example of moral living, protection against the sins of the world, and moral education to the young.<sup>91</sup> Of particular relevance to the religious basis of reform efforts and to one of the major agendas of reformers—the education of young Canadians—was the “Self and Sex Series,” as it came to be known. The publication in 1897 of *What a Young Boy Ought to Know* marked the debut of a series intended to educate North Americans of all ages in the “proper” relations between the sexes, the healthy expression of sexuality, and the care of the body. Published in Philadelphia and distributed in Canada by the Methodist Church, the Self and Sex Series discussed the body, health and sex from puberty to old age, promulgating the healthiness and morality of traditional sexual values. Sylvanus Stall, the author of several of the books in the series, urged women to remain pure and to fulfil their roles as good wives and mothers. Pre-marital sex, masturbation and infidelity were discouraged for both sexes.<sup>92</sup> Moderation was also

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<sup>91</sup> Neil Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion*, 342-343, 363-364; Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water*, 58-60; Brian Clarke, “English-Speaking Canada from 1854,” in *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada*, eds. Terrence Murphy & Roberto Perin (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), 289.

<sup>92</sup> For a discussion of the Self and Sex Series, see Michael Bliss, “‘Pure Books on Avoided Subjects’,” 89-108; Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water*, 31, 69, 70; Lana Castleman, “Self, Sex and Moral Reform in English Canada, 1890-1920,” *Blurred Genres*, vol. 2 (Winter/Spring 1994), 35-49.

urged; not only were the various sexual vices to be avoided, but even within marriage one was to avoid sexual excess.<sup>93</sup>

The Self and Sex Series represented but one of a series of attempts to instil in young minds the behaviours considered appropriate to the living of a moral, Christian life and to the creation of strong and fit Canadian citizens.<sup>94</sup> It is not known how many of these books were distributed in Canada, but given that they were sold to some with the specific intention that they would be passed on from child to child, and from adult to adult, it seems reasonable to assume that they had a wide, although by no means universal, readership.

Of considerable concern to moral and social reformers was the impact of urbanization and immigration on the moral fibre of the nation. The nineteenth-century Canadian city, the purported site of much “degeneration,” was a vibrant and bustling milieu in which middle- and working-class Canadians alike found themselves thrust into closer proximity with each other, a proximity that was not altogether comfortable. Increasingly, anglophone Canadians began to feel “invaded” by immigrants from other cultural groups, immigrants who did not share the same values, faith, and family and work relationships held dear by middle-class English Canadians. They began to fear that the Canada they knew was under threat.

The Canada of the early twentieth century was socially and materially different from that of the nineteenth century. By the turn of the century, over one third of Canadians lived in urban areas.<sup>95</sup> One of the most notable features of twentieth-century Canadian society was its increasing

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<sup>93</sup> Michael Bliss, “How We Used To Learn About Sex,” *Maclean's* (March 1974), 61.

<sup>94</sup> Canada’s “pioneer sex educator”, Arthur Beall, was a nationalist who told boys and girls that “if they really loved Canada they would become builders of the nation by thinking only clean and noble thoughts and producing clean and noble children.” Michael Bliss, “How We Used To Learn About Sex,” *Maclean's* (March 1974), 66.

<sup>95</sup> The total population of Canada in 1901 was 5, 371, 315, of whom 2,182, 947 lived in Ontario. Of the total population, some 1, 867, 260 lived in urban areas of over 1000 persons or more. M.C. Urquhart and K.A.H. Buckley, eds., *Historical Statistics of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 14-15.

obsession with questions of social decay. In the rapid growth of cities and changing work and recreational patterns, middle-class English Canadians saw a threat to the survival of middle-class morality. Not only were there increasing numbers in the cities of those the middle class saw as “unfit,” but it was feared that the very nature of the city itself was conducive to the transgression of appropriate sexual and gender norms. In these new environs, even the “respectable” might be tempted into morally and physically dangerous activities. It was believed by many that social disorder and moral decay were the inevitable result of rapid changes in the structure of Canadian society and its workforce.

Carolyn Strange’s *Toronto’s Girl Problem* reveals clearly the tensions between the growing importance of female labour in Toronto’s light industries and the concerns of moral reformers that the massive influx of young, single women into Canada’s largest city promoted sexual disorder.<sup>96</sup> Assessing the various fears about female employment which persistently found voice among Toronto’s elite, Strange demonstrates that, until the 1910s, single women in urban centres were viewed as women “adrift” from moral control. Away from the watchful eyes of family and community, young women with leisure time and money to spend were partaking of Toronto’s numerous recreations without the “benefit” of moral guidance. Toronto’s urban reformers launched a formal investigation of the state of immorality in their city. The report of the Toronto Social Survey Commission of 1915 portrayed vice as the tawdry underside of the “Queen City.” Sexual vice signified a serious breakdown in social organization, one of the alleged sources of vice being the single, working woman.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Carolyn Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem*.

<sup>97</sup> Carolyn Strange, “From Modern Babylon to a City upon a Hill: The Toronto Social Survey Commission of 1915 and the Search for Sexual Order in the City,” in Roger Hall, William Westfall & Laurel Sefton MacDowell, eds., *Patterns of the Past: Interpreting Ontario's History* (Toronto & Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1988), 256.

Strange's analysis bears relevance not only for Toronto, but for other Canadian cities as well. While Toronto provided numerous opportunities for female "independence" and recreation, other urban areas were also likely to provide the environment for unchaperoned female excursions and "terrible scenes of immorality in the parks."<sup>98</sup> Indeed, the opposition to the presence of women in British Columbia's beer parlours demonstrates clearly the assumption, even in the 1920s, that women who socialized publicly were *prima facie* of loose sexual morals. The banning of women from beer parlours in BC and, subsequently, their segregation from male drinkers was based on the presumption that an unchaperoned woman in a beer parlour either was a prostitute or was of "bad" character.<sup>99</sup>

Throughout Canada, gender was linked to race and ethnicity in discourses of sexual danger. While all non-Anglo persons were potentially immoral influences, in the eyes of many Canadians it was the Chinese who were thought to be the most depraved sexually. Chinese men in particular were portrayed as evil influences on the sexual morality of white women. The "Chinatowns" of various Canadian cities, including Vancouver, Victoria and Toronto, were portrayed as dens of vice, as sites of moral contagion and corruption.<sup>100</sup> Perhaps the most notable exponent of such

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<sup>98</sup> *Toronto's Girl Problem*, 59.

<sup>99</sup> Robert A. Campbell, "Ladies and Escorts: Gender Segregation and Public Policy in British Columbia Beer Parlours, 1925-1945," *BC Studies*, nos. 105-106 (Spring/Summer 1995), 119-138.

<sup>100</sup> For discussion of attitudes towards Chinese people in Canada, see Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991); Patricia Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989); Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Toward Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978); and Christie Shaw, "'Opium Dens' and 'Fallen Women': Reconstructing Race, Gender and Sexuality in Victoria 1880-1930," (Honours thesis, University of Victoria, 1998). Other groups—such as Aboriginal peoples, for example— were assumed to be more promiscuous than most Anglo-Canadians, but were more often portrayed as morally weak rather than as direct sexual threats to the white community.

views, but by no means the most prolific, was Emily Murphy, first-wave feminist, magistrate and juvenile court judge. In *The Black Candle*, Murphy argued that naive young women were easily lured into the use of drugs, against the power of which “no girl has any chance.” Such “minnows” were the prey of “sharks” located in “Greek or Assyrian candy shops, Chinese cafés, cabaret-bars, negro opium joints, [and] disorderly houses.”<sup>101</sup> The cities, and particularly those urban areas inhabited by people regarded as “undesirables,” offered all too many temptations to young white women away from the stabilizing influence of family and church. But it was not the case that rural areas were thought to be entirely free of moral contagion; indeed, many reform organizations found prominent activists among the rural elite, who were as concerned as their urban counterparts that the “true” Canadian way of life was being eroded.

Concerns about the moral and physical health of the nation were expressed primarily through the activities of various reform organizations, the members of which were largely, but not exclusively, from the middle class and the upper levels of the working class. Of these, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, founded in 1874, is perhaps the best known. The creation of the National Council of Women in 1893 and of the Women’s Institute in 1897 marked further expansion in women’s political ambitions. Women’s organizations in this period blended radical social politics with racial prejudice and an adherence to women’s traditional role as wives and mothers. While progressive in the sense that they espoused for (white) women full political rights and social equality (based on separate but equal spheres), first-wave feminists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remained influenced by sexual constructs based on Christian morality combined with eugenic concern for the future of the race. The sexuality they allowed for women was heterosexual, matrimonial, and procreative.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Emily Murphy, *The Black Candle* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1922), 303-304.

<sup>102</sup> Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, passim; Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race*, 68-88; and Carol Lee Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred?*, 24-39.

One of the many influences on attitudes towards sexuality and its relationship to the national good was the eugenics movement. Eugenics was a system of belief which held that it was possible, through selective breeding, to improve the physical and moral health of future generations. The eugenicists argued that the “unfit” in society should be prevented from reproducing, while the “fit” should be encouraged to reproduce.<sup>103</sup> What constituted “fitness” was, of course, largely concomitant with what was middle-class, respectable, and Protestant. The “unfit” were those regarded as mental and moral “defectives,” the unemployed, the insane, the intemperate, and the majority of the members of immigrant groups who were not of Anglo-Saxon or Nordic origin. The category “unfit” comprised not only those whose intellectual abilities or physical characteristics were held to be undesirable, but also those who manifested behaviours clearly at odds with prevailing gender and sexual norms.<sup>104</sup>

Sexual behaviour and its regulation was an important focus of eugenic reform. It was, after all, through the appropriate sexuality of the “fit” that the race would be saved from degeneration. Conversely, it was through the immoral and excessive breeding of the “unfit” that Canadian society would be plunged into the depths of moral and physical degradation which threatened the extinction of a truly “Canadian” way of life. Eugenics, and those influenced by it, held fast to gender norms which had their origins in the previous century: women were both the potential

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<sup>103</sup> Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race*, 24-25.

<sup>104</sup> That the eugenics movement influenced attitudes and policies on sexuality, and was itself influenced by dominant norms regarding sexuality, can be seen in the degree to which “inappropriate” sexuality—usually promiscuity—was thought to be a sign of mental defectiveness and was often cause for eugenic sterilization. For information on the relationship between sexuality and sterilization, see Tamara Vrooman, “The Wayward and the Feeble-Minded: Euthenics, Eugenics, and the Provincial Industrial Home for Girls, 1914-1929,” (M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, 1994), 46. See also Ruth McDonald, “A Policy of Privilege: The Alberta Sexual Sterilization Program 1928-1972,” (M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, 1996), 36 and Monica Wosilius, “Eugenics, Insanity and Feeble-mindedness: British Columbia’s Sterilization Policy from 1933-1943,” (M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, 1995), and Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race*.

saviours of the race and those who could ultimately destroy it through their indiscriminate and immoral sexuality. Women who were sexually active in ways not approved were, by definition, “unfit” and could be treated as such. The various industrial schools and asylums in each province were the home of many a girl or woman who had contravened gender norms by being “promiscuous,” by dressing inappropriately, by masturbating, or by otherwise not acting in a sexually docile manner. As Tamara Vrooman points out,

Young women, as potential mothers, were expected to exhibit self-control and to engage in marital sexual relations only. Any perceived transgression of this expectation amounted to delinquent behaviour in the eyes of reformers. If feeble-mindedness was a principle cause of delinquency, reformers argued, then the young delinquent woman, who was by definition immoral and sexually deviant, was particularly dangerous.<sup>105</sup>

Eugenics was but one of several theories influencing Canada at this time. It was also in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the ideas of sexology and psychology began to affect the ways in which individual Canadians, and the medical profession in particular, regarded sex and sexuality. The study of sex became a science, in which it was now possible to classify persons according to their sexual behaviour and degree of gender conformity or non-conformity. The doctor became the expert of sex, whose knowledge acquired the weight of gospel truth. Medical interests reflected the moral imperatives of the day, even when they argued for such seemingly progressive measures as the greater availability of contraception.

In her study of nineteenth-century medicine and its relationship to women, Wendy Mitchinson suggests that doctors recognized the existence of strong sexual urges in women but that they were uncomfortable with them, because female sexuality seemed to contradict notions of women’s greater purity. Mitchinson argues that the gap between the age of marriage for men and

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<sup>105</sup> Tamara Vrooman, “The Wayward and the Feeble-Minded: Euthenics, Eugenics, and the Provincial Industrial Home for Girls, 1914-1929,” 46. See also Ruth McDonald, “A Policy of Privilege: The Alberta Sexual Sterilization Program 1928-1972,” 36 and Monica Wosilius, “Eugenics, Insanity and Feeble-mindedness: British Columbia’s Sterilization Policy from 1933-1943.”

for women began to close in the late nineteenth century, with the result that sexual attractiveness became a more important component of the marital relationship.<sup>106</sup> The solution to the dilemma that this posed was to attempt to maintain a strict relationship between sexuality and reproduction, and many doctors were consequently opposed to contraception, as it suggested the possibility of untrammelled female sexuality.<sup>107</sup>

One of the most important developments to inform heterosexuality at the *fin de siècle* was the rise of the companionate marriage. By the end of the nineteenth century, the earlier notions of the sexual double standard had begun to give way to a new understanding of male and female sexuality and of relations between the sexes. It was now more commonly acknowledged that women were not necessarily biologically passive, that they had sexual desires, and that the appropriate expression of those desires within the heterosexual marriage was important. It was now also increasingly thought that men were able to be sexually moderate within marriage, but in the new ideology men were still assumed to have stronger physical desires than women. Many a new marriage manual urged the sexual fulfilment of both parties. Female subservience to male sexuality was replaced in the new rhetoric by attention to the requirement of shared enjoyment in the marriage bed.

We should be careful, however, not to assume that this new sexual “liberalism” was necessarily of equal benefit to women as it was to men. The rhetoric of the companionate marriage relied on a portrayal of Victorian sexuality as brutal and repressive and posited the new ideals as a liberation from standards of old. Men were required to “learn” about women’s sexual needs and they were encouraged to be more gentle and responsive to women, but they were also told repeatedly that sexual expression was a fundamental part of their manhood and their adequacy as human beings. As would the “free love” era of the 1960s, the era of the companionate marriage

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<sup>106</sup> Wendy Mitchinson, *The Nature of Their Bodies*, 100.

<sup>107</sup> Wendy Mitchinson, *The Nature of Their Bodies*, 123-124.

actually *increased* the sexual burden imposed on women and limited their autonomy in their ability to refuse sexual advances. In the Victorian era, a wife could theoretically refuse to be “sullied” on a frequent basis, leaving her husband’s sexual excesses to occur with prostitutes or other women (or men). In the new century, women were expected to share greater sexual intimacy with their husbands. While doubtless enjoyable for many, as indicated by the numerous enquiries from women and men with which birth control activists and others dealt daily, the new standards of the companionate marriage served to make women more sexually available to men than before. Women who did not enjoy the sexual attention were at risk of being condemned as frigid and abnormal.<sup>108</sup>

Among the most influential campaigners for the new sexual mores were the birth control activists of the early twentieth century. The pioneering English birth control activist Marie Stopes was influential in Canadian society. Her works on fertility, contraception and marriage proved immensely popular to women and men seeking to enjoy their sexuality within the new “companionate” marriage of the twentieth century while remaining able to limit their family size. Stopes’ works, and those of American advocate Margaret Sanger, also influential in Canada, made birth control more acceptable by arguing that it was imperative for the attainment of sexual fulfilment within marriage.

Sexology and psychology posed new problems for those in society who did not conform to the ideal of matrimonial heterosexuality. Sexology was a new “science” of sexuality which arose in the late nineteenth century and became increasingly influential in the early twentieth century. Sexologists attempted “to isolate, and individualise, the specific characteristics of sexuality, to detail its normal paths and morbid variations, to emphasise its power and to speculate on its

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<sup>108</sup> For a discussion of this subject, see Christina Simmons, “Modern Sexuality and the Myth of Victorian Repression,” in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, eds. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, with Robert Padgug (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 157-177.

effects.”<sup>109</sup> The sexologists argued that it was possible to isolate and define the nature of what was referred to as the “sexual instinct.”<sup>110</sup> Sexuality became something one studied with the lens of science rather than something one pronounced on with the language of religion. Abandoning such moral categories as sin, debauchery, and excess, the new sex pioneers categorized human sexuality as healthy or diseased, normal or abnormal. The construction of the “normal” took place largely by default, as it was primarily the deviations from an a priori ideal about which the sexologists wrote.

The most influential of the sexologists in the Canadian context was Havelock Ellis, whose magnum opus *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*<sup>111</sup> was arguably the most significant “scientific” text since Charles Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*. Ellis’ earlier text, *The Task of Social Hygiene*, was the foundation for much Canadian reform of sexuality. Dr. Gordon Bates, leader of the National Council for Combatting Venereal Disease, later known as the Canada Social Hygiene Council, argued that Ellis’ work formed the basis for the Council’s programme to build up the race by allowing only the marriages of those medically determined to be free of disease.<sup>112</sup> Ellis’ sexological works were, however, read only by a minority of people. More popular were his works on morality.

Sexology was an important stage in the “secularization” of sexuality. There have always existed myriad types of sexual activity, but sexuality itself as a way of defining oneself or being

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<sup>109</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (London & New York: Routledge, 1985), 65-66.

<sup>110</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800* (London: Longman, 1981), 143.

<sup>111</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (New York: Random House, 1937). The work was originally published in 1897.

<sup>112</sup> Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race*, 74. Ellis’ views on homosexuality are discussed later in this chapter.

defined is a creation of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, that period in which the discussion and confession of sex began its gradual move from the purview of religion to that of science, and medicine in particular. Prior to this crucial moment in the history of European sexuality, the Church had been primarily responsible for the definition, judgement, and control of sexual behaviour. Transgressions against sexual norms were transgressions against God's law, and wayward individuals were likely to be dealt with via the confessional or via social as well as ecclesiastical reprobation.

Between the end of the eighteenth century and the early twentieth, however, science—and most particularly medicine—came to govern sexuality, and it was the new apostles of science who became the arbiters of good sexual morals and appropriate gender behaviour. Sexuality became defined at this time as being “by nature,” which is to say that it was “a domain susceptible to pathological processes, and hence one calling for therapeutic or normalizing interventions; a field of meanings to decipher; the site of processes concealed by specific mechanisms; a focus of indefinite causal relations; and an obscure speech (*parole*) that had to be ferreted out and listened to.”<sup>113</sup> A science of sexuality, or *scientia sexualis* as Foucault terms it, was born, part of which was the gradual establishment of a network of experts, authorities, rules, norms, and linguistic conventions now governing sexuality in place of the Church. Sexology was but an early manifestation of that *scientia sexualis*.

Religion remained very important in the definition of certain types of sexual activity as either moral or immoral, and certainly it was religious precepts to which individual Canadians and moral and social reformers often referred in their pronouncements on sexuality. As the twentieth century wore on, however, it was increasingly the case that policies regarding sexuality and public attitudes about it were underwritten by notions of normal and abnormal, healthy and unhealthy, notions having their origin in the “science” of sexology and in psychological discourse. In many

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<sup>113</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 68.

ways, science simply supported older religious ideas about sexuality and framed them in new terminology. Science should not therefore be seen as *necessarily* in conflict with religion on the subject of sexuality; rather, many older norms came under the jurisdiction of a new kind of “expert,” secular rather than religious. Sexology in particular did, however, by positing biological factors as influential and even causative in sexual behaviour, remove sexuality from the realm of choice, and therefore of sin.

While sexology became one of the most influential disciplines of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it would be naive to assume its total hegemony over “Western” culture. As Jeffrey Weeks has commented,

Sexology has never been a unified discipline; its participants have never expressed a single intellectual perspective; and its effects have never been unilinear or gone unchallenged. Sexual ideas alone do not create the sexual world. Nevertheless the high priests of sexual theory *have* contributed to the world we inhabit: they offered ideas and often practical help to reforming, and not so reforming, activity; they promoted the belief that sex was of crucial importance to individual health, identity and happiness; they marketed many a handbook and often a technique or two to attain the joys of sex; they gave a scientific credence to often dubious political positions; and they set an agenda for sexual change which, to a remarkable degree, has been completed. Their work has been appropriated, deployed, utilised and occasionally distorted in a variety of social arenas and forms.<sup>114</sup>

The sexology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while often conservative in its orientation and seeming to reinforce and re-state earlier attitudes towards sexuality and gender, nevertheless provided the rubric for the important changes in sexual ideology which would occur in the new century. Sexological ideas were capable of being employed in multi-faceted ways, and thus could be used for positive and reformist ends as well as conservative ones. For those seeking a language with which to express and in which to understand their same-sex desires, sexology was a new mantra.

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<sup>114</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, 7.

Similarly, psychology had both positive and negative effects on attitudes towards sexuality. Contrary to sexology's tendency to place importance on the sexual instinct as a biological imperative, Sigmund Freud largely abandoned the association between biology and sexual object choice.<sup>115</sup> Freud developed a complex theory which portrayed sexuality as a series of conflicting desires and dreams constantly at war with a basic libidinal energy. The nature of sexual expression, and most especially of sexual orientation, indicated to Freud the level of psychological maturity in sexual development. For Freud, matrimonial and reproductive heterosexuality was the most mature and evolved psychological state, whereas homosexuality, masturbation, and other non-procreative sexual behaviours indicated that a person was "stalled" in the process of sexual development by some unconscious and traumatic crisis which could only be cured by means of psychoanalysis.<sup>116</sup> Freud's ideas on the subject of sexuality would only gradually inform sexual discourse in the twentieth century, however. He became increasingly popular with middle-class thinkers during the 1920s, but it was not until the years of the Second World War and the Cold War that Freud's followers became widely influential.

The early twentieth-century sexual context made sexual autonomy and self-identification for women particularly difficult. Even though, in the new century, sexuality was given a more positive demeanour than in the Victorian era, it was still fraught with moral and physical danger. While women were no longer perceived as lacking sexual drives or as essentially passive, female sexuality was imbued with an aura of inherent instability; it was a force which had to be contained and controlled to ensure its proper and moral expression. Women were still held to possess greater sexual self-control than men, but they had nevertheless to be careful to protect their chastity, for they allegedly were too easily influenced by the wiles of unscrupulous men. Georgina Sackville urged young women to be especially careful of their virginity before marriage. She commented:

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<sup>115</sup> Although his views clearly maintained dominant gender norms, which were predicated on essentialist ideas about the "natural" and "appropriate" roles of the sexes.

<sup>116</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, 127-156.

Let no girl who would avoid a life of unhappiness, and bitter remorse, trust the promises, or submit her person to any man until legally married; for all experience has shown, that if a girl has no power to hold her lover but by the sensualistic; if she has no power over the intellectual and moral nature of the man she loves, and who professes to love her, she had better strive no longer to hold him. The man who is not willing to hold his manhood in abeyance and seeks sexual relations with a girl before marriage, loves not her heart and soul, but her person, and all his caresses, kissing and fondling under the disguise of love, are but a prelude to the surrender of that person to his animal passions.<sup>117</sup>

By the mid-twentieth century, human sexuality was the subject of increasing public debate and journalistic fervour. “Never before,” it was argued, “was so much sex information known by so many at so young an age.”<sup>118</sup> Canadian newspapers and magazines were replete with sexual scandals and speculation, the study of human sexuality became a major preoccupation of the medical profession and of psychologists, and images of sexuality were widely available in the numerous pulp novels of the period. Sex, the great “secret” of Victorian society, had acquired a public face. Not only was it now accepted that all Canadians, male and female, were sexual beings, but it was also thought that sexuality was the most important aspect of human psychology—that sex lay at the heart of all relationships, both healthy and unhealthy.

One of the most influential mid-century arbiters of cultural aesthetics was the women’s magazine. Canadian magazines, like their American and British counterparts, reflected prevailing gender norms and norms of sexuality while attempting also to appeal to women’s changing interests and tastes. The content of magazines changed over the decades in response to changes in the perceived roles and interests of women, but gender prescription was always present. In the

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<sup>117</sup> Provincial Archives of Alberta, 52. Acc. No. 77.209 SE, Georgina Sackville, *Unmarried Mothers and Illegitimate Children* (Alberta, 1929).

<sup>118</sup> National Archives of Canada, RG 33/131 Acc. 84/253 vol. 2, Canadian Penal Association, June 1948, Kenneth H. Rogers, “Interim Report of the Committee on the Sex Offender,” 23.

1920s, “magazines could contain a smorgasbord of material, with something for everyone.”<sup>119</sup> During the Great Depression, with advertising revenue and magazine sales decreasing, editors kept only those features that they deemed to have the widest appeal. Mary Ellen Zuckerman argues that editors assumed “that all women resembled the white, middle-class readers they traditionally targeted; and that core subjects existed that were of interest to all women, such as housekeeping and beauty advice.”<sup>120</sup> When the Depression was over, magazine fiction rose to a place of prominence in the women’s magazines. Most magazine stories focused on “love, romance, fantasy, and escape” and offered women few non-traditional role models.<sup>121</sup> After the Second World War, magazines published a greater diversity of articles reflecting women’s greater participation in the labour force and in business.

Popular magazines, marriage manuals, experts and parents alike all had much to say on the subject of courtship in the twentieth century. Heterosexual courtship, that ritual dance of display and enticement, underwent significant changes between the late nineteenth century and 1965, although notions of chastity and respectability remained paramount. In the nineteenth century, advice manuals advocated the presence of a chaperon during courtship. A chaperon, whose role it was to accompany a young woman on her outings and to police her interactions with men, was usually an older female relative or friend.<sup>122</sup> Chaperons were used primarily by middle- and upper-class families.

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<sup>119</sup> Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women’s Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 102.

<sup>120</sup> Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women’s Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995*, 102.

<sup>121</sup> Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women’s Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995*, 180-181.

<sup>122</sup> E.S. Turner, *A History of Courting* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1955), 150.

It was among the middle and upper classes that there developed a style of courtship language that would heavily influence relationships between women of those classes. Love letters of the late nineteenth century were replete with “high-flown phrases”<sup>123</sup> and often expressed love in relation to the spiritual or divine.<sup>124</sup> Such language would also find expression in the “romantic friendships” of the late nineteenth century, such as those discussed by Lillian Faderman in *Surpassing the Love of Men*. A very similar style of language would, I argue, later be used with only moderate alterations and inclusions of new sexual discourse in some twentieth-century middle-class same-sex relationships.<sup>125</sup>

In what was, at time of publication, the first monograph on courtship and marriage in Canadian history, Peter Ward argues that nineteenth-century courtship and marriage were as much public as private events, and that historians have tended to overlook this fact and have inaccurately argued that “the rise of modern marriage...is simply a story of growing personal freedom from social and familial constraints.”<sup>126</sup> Ward has been justly criticized for his generalizing to the whole of English Canada norms and customs which were distinctly middle-class and Anglo-Canadian.<sup>127</sup> Ward also grants too much autonomy in the courtship and marriage process to

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<sup>123</sup> E.S. Turner, *A History of Courting*, 159.

<sup>124</sup> Among the many examples of this style of writing are the love letters of Alice Freeman and George Herbert Palmer, two American academics whose courtship is recorded in *An Academic Courtship: Letters of Alice Freeman and George Herbert Palmer 1886-1887* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1940). Both Alice and George wrote letters which combined tender expressions of emotion, “high-flown” language, intellectual discussion, and references to God and His Grace.

<sup>125</sup> These relationships are discussed in detail in Chapters Three to Five.

<sup>126</sup> Peter Ward, *Courtship, Love and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century English Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>127</sup> See the reviews by Bettina Bradbury, *Canadian Historical Review* 72, 4 (December 1991), 597-599, and Suzanne Morton, *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 26, 51 (May 1993), 194-196.

women. He is correct, however, in pointing out that courtship and marriage cannot be understood separately from their social context.

And what of working-class courtship? Historians such as Ginger Frost and John Gillis point out that working-class norms of courtship were distinct.<sup>128</sup> Frost argues that in the nineteenth century “the working classes had a distinct set of sexual mores that defied those of the elite.”<sup>129</sup> Using evidence from breach-of-promise cases, Frost shows that many working-class women “used their sexuality in courtship, gambling that the intimacy would lead to a long-standing commitment or would push a reluctant fiancé to the altar.”<sup>130</sup> A similar analysis has been undertaken for Ontario by Karen Dubinsky, who demonstrates that sexual activity was often a part of courtship in turn-of-the-century Ontario, particularly when a promise of marriage had been made.<sup>131</sup>

The late nineteenth century also saw the creation of a number of slang words for love-making, such as “spooning” and “mashing.”<sup>132</sup> The new language of love was conveyed not only verbally, but also in media and fiction, and rapidly emerged as hegemonic among at least the middle class. It was less that new forms of love-making had arisen than that pre-marital sexuality was receiving more public recognition and thus required description. The playful terms belie the seriousness with which spooning and mashing were viewed by many, however. Pre-marital sex remained socially proscribed, and women in particular were held to exacting

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<sup>128</sup> Ginger S. Frost, *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England* (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 1995); John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>129</sup> Frost, *Promises Broken*, 98.

<sup>130</sup> Frost, *Promises Broken*, 98.

<sup>131</sup> Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances*.

<sup>132</sup> E.S. Turner, *A History of Courting*, 176-177.

standards of behaviour. Self-control was “a skill to be mastered by women as well as men, but a woman was under an additional obligation—to help a man control himself...If [a woman] failed to exercise her own, and to enforce her man’s, self-control, she put herself—and her womanhood—at risk.”<sup>133</sup>

Many historians have argued that pre-twentieth-century heterosexual relationships were less predicated on the notion of romantic love, as economic and other factors played an important part in spousal selection before the turn of the century. Frost suggests that one of the reasons for the gradual disappearance of breach-of-promise cases was the permeation of the companionate view of marriage throughout society...Romantic attachment became the most important reason for marriage, so if either party felt that her or his affection was not deep enough, most people felt that she or he should not be forced into a permanent union.”<sup>134</sup> She argues, however, that this view was not new to the twentieth century; what was new was that women of varying social classes were more able to base their relationships solely on romantic love in the twentieth century, as economic factors were no longer as much of a consideration. While I might disagree with the imputation that working-class people did not often marry for love, it is reasonable to assume that economic security played an important role in mate selection for many in the working class, as did security and status among middle-class people.

Contradictions continued to be the case throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Advice literature on courtship began to be less uniform than it had been in the nineteenth century. Greater acknowledgement of women’s sexual feelings emerged, and authors of advice works often attempted to wrestle with the complications offered the courting couple by the new world of amusements and technology. Many in North American society viewed the new entertainments with trepidation, embodying as they did some of the main features of assumed moral decadence:

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<sup>133</sup> Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 237.

<sup>134</sup> Frost, *Promises Broken*, 173.

unsupervised fraternizing of the sexes, bodily contact, heat, exertion, and often alcohol. That some working-class women were trading sexuality for “cheap amusements” further raised the ire of moral reformers who saw the decline of civilization looming in the skating rinks and other entertainments available to young couples.<sup>135</sup>

The nature and location of courtship rituals changed somewhat between the First World War and 1960. A new system of “dating” arose, in which young people increasingly courted away from the prying eyes and control of family and community. Heterosexual courtship became, as Bailey suggests, “a private act conducted in the public world.”<sup>136</sup> A proliferation of advice works on courtship made it in many ways a very public affair. The new experts of the twentieth century—the psychologists, doctors and social workers whose theories influenced every facet of North American life—had much to say about “appropriate” and “inappropriate” courtship. Bailey suggests that one of the predominant features of advice on American courtship was “the lure of an imagined past,” in which older norms of courtship based on male economic superiority—he works, she does not—increasingly conflicted with the changing world of women’s work. Anxiety about twentieth-century courtship was often anxiety about the changing status of the male-female economic relationship.<sup>137</sup>

By 1920, it was no longer the case that men “called” on women. The older custom of calling at a young woman’s home and being entertained in the parlour—in middle-class and some

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<sup>135</sup> On the subject of working-class women and recreation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century city, see: Carolyn Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem*; Carolyn Strange, “From Modern Babylon to a City upon a Hill: The Toronto Social Survey Commission of 1915 and the Search for Sexual Order in the City” ; Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks*; Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*; and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986).

<sup>136</sup> Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 3.

<sup>137</sup> Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 4.

upper-working-class homes, which had parlours—was being replaced by a system of dating, in which it was more customary for the couple to go out together and partake of the emerging recreational and entertainment world. Bailey suggests, however, that because the world of the city, and especially entertainment, required money, “men’s money...became the basis of the dating system and, thus, of courtship.”<sup>138</sup> Initially, dating originated in the new availability of public recreation, in changing notions of “a good time,” and in rebellion against the constraint of respectability. By the interwar period, the automobile was assumed to be responsible for the new craze. While not entirely accurate, since the automobile simply “contributed to the rise of dating as a *national* practice, especially in rural and suburban areas,” this assumption reveals that dating had become a normal courtship practice.<sup>139</sup>

But what was “dating”? In an analysis of courtship perhaps a little economically determinist in emphasis, Bailey argues that dating was about competition and was “an accommodation to modern life.”<sup>140</sup> Dating was discussed, by experts as well as by young couples, in terms of competition and popularity. Access to recreational activities, to cars, and to the right clothes and other accoutrements of courtship required money, and consequently courtship in the twentieth century was determined by class and by gender, as men were supposed to pay.

The relationship between courtship and sex changed and strengthened in the twentieth century. Whereas in the nineteenth, sexual activity was linked almost exclusively with marriage and adulthood—except insofar as the Victorians delineated the unacceptable forms and circumstances of sexual activity— in the twentieth century sexuality became increasingly associated with youth and courtship. There were disapproving voices, but increasingly as the century wore on advice literature and other sources on courtship acknowledged that pre-marital

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<sup>138</sup> Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 13.

<sup>139</sup> Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 19.

<sup>140</sup> Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 26.

sexual activity was occurring.<sup>141</sup> What became important was the governing of the nature and extent of that pre-marital sexuality. Petting and necking, as Bailey suggests, “were the major conventions youth contributed to courtship in the years between World War I and the sexual revolution of the 1960s.”<sup>142</sup> Necking—sexual activity from the neck up—and petting—stimulation from the neck down, involving sexual activity without intercourse—were different not only in nature but also in morality. Necking was generally more widely tolerated than petting, since petting was a slippery slope towards intercourse.

An assessment of the gendered expectations about petting reveals that the sexual double standard was still present in many ways in the twentieth century. While it had been eroded in the sense that it was now recognized that women did have sexual feelings needing expression, it was still the case that men were assumed to have greater sexual feeling and that women held the greater burden of morality and appropriate behaviour. The virtuous twentieth-century woman still avoided pre-marital intercourse, and many in North American society expected her to avoid petting as well, lest she lose her chastity and/or acquire a reputation for being “fast.” Women in the new era of companionate relationships were expected to feel sexual pleasure and be sexually available, but had also to avoid going “too far.” This was a delicate balancing act indeed, and women were blamed more than men for any lapses that occurred.<sup>143</sup> As Brett Harvey reveals in her oral history of American women in the 1950s, young women “had their hands full—literally—keeping their valuable reputations intact, their boyfriends attentive, and their own desires in check.”<sup>144</sup>

In the postwar era, “dating” was supplanted somewhat by “going steady.” While the former practice was a flexible and casual one, the postwar emphasis on social and sexual

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<sup>141</sup> Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 77-78.

<sup>142</sup> Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, , 80.

<sup>143</sup> Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 93-95.

<sup>144</sup> Brett Harvey, *The Fifties: A Women’s Oral History* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 3.

conformity resulted in a move towards serial monogamy. Going steady became the pre-marital ideal. In North America particularly, going steady was not only about Cold War economics and politics, but rather was “also a means of organizing social relations among youth...Serial monogamy, with its lack of spontaneity—its stability—made the unattached especially visible.”<sup>145</sup> Dating and going steady were practices subject to both expert advice and peer pressure. Advice literature of the day attempted to set the standards for both practices, offering guidance on the “right” ways and people to date. Ultimately, however, one’s peers had significant influence, and peer enforcement “brought the regulation of what was normal down to the level of young people themselves.”<sup>146</sup>

By the end of the period under study in this work, considerable anxiety was expressed in many quarters of society about the changing standards of sexuality and morality. Robert K. Kelley, writing originally in the late 1960s, argued that America was “a society in crisis. The old established values and standards are everywhere called into question...This climate of perplexity certainly affects each one of us.”<sup>147</sup> But a climate of perplexity had governed heterosexual courtship from at least the middle of the nineteenth century. What was more pronounced was, perhaps, the more public nature of the discourse and the extent of the anxiety rather than its mere existence. For the control of sexual behaviour, and most particularly the emerging sexuality of the adolescent, had become of grave concern to postwar North American society.

The more public construction of sex and sexuality did not mean the demise of gender-based sexual oppression. The twentieth century witnessed vacillating opinions about the acceptability of women’s paid employment outside the home, about women’s right to sexual autonomy, about the

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<sup>145</sup> Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 100.

<sup>146</sup> Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 100.

<sup>147</sup> Robert E. Kelley, *Courtship, Marriage, and the Family* 2nd e. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 25.

dangers of pre-marital and non-procreative sexuality, and about the consequences for national health of women's independence from men. The working woman was now less controversial than initially she had been, but her presence in the work place was still seen as less than ideal and would be challenged in the postwar years. It remained the case that women's primary role was thought to be in the home, as wife and mother in the heterosexual family. Women's movement outside the home was tolerated because of the new interests of industry and commerce, and because of the increasingly acquisitive nature of society. That tolerance, however, was short-lived when women were seen to "fail" in their proper roles as wives and mothers: if children were neglected or husbands were required to perform "women's work" around the home, women were regarded as having abandoned their duties for the capricious acquisition of such luxuries and trifles as economic independence and status.<sup>148</sup>

Women's sexual respectability was a crucial determinant of social status. The sexually promiscuous woman remained the embodiment of moral and physical contagion, and while women's sexuality was now "natural," it was also dangerous. Female sexual autonomy, outside the appropriate confines of heterosexual matrimony, remained a threat to social order and to national health. It was within this largely negative context that women in Canada had somehow to understand and enjoy their own sexuality.

After the Second World War, the discursive landscape of Canadian sexuality changed in direct relation to fears arising from the war and to insecurities about Canada's national prowess. The war sparked a number of fears about changing gender norms and their consequences. In particular, as Ruth Roach Pierson has shown, crises about women's participation in wartime work and economic factors resulted in a nationwide reinvestment in the traditional, nuclear family.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988), 45; Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 27; Mona Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal*, 52-55.

<sup>149</sup> Ruth Roach Pierson, 'They're Still Women After All', 216-217.

Newspapers and the government mounted lengthy campaigns against those it portrayed as sexual psychopaths or threats to national security. The campaigns, and the resultant prosecutions and employment terminations that ensued, were focused mainly at gay men, but the intensification of the medical gaze also had consequences for women. In decades in which gender was everything, a single transgression could be very costly.

The postwar era was one of entrenchment of gender norms, with considerable effort being made to define the “normal” style of Canadian life. Arguments in favour of women’s return to the home were not merely about the need for men to be able to return to the jobs they had left; postwar security concerns and changing economic realities underwrote fears about the stability of the nation. The heterosexual, nuclear family was regarded as the building block of the nation and a bulwark against communism. The nation was the family writ large, and threats to the family were thus threats to Canada as a whole.<sup>150</sup> Psychologists had a crucial role to play in the new postwar obsession with normality. During the war years, psychologists had established a reputation as the arbiters of good health and mental and moral fitness in their role within the military. When war was over, they sought to build upon that reputation and extend their role into the whole of Canadian society.

The 1950s was a decade of incipient gender transformations: the gains that women had made in terms of employment opportunities, incomes and benefits would provide fodder for improvements in the 1960s; the IUD and the contraceptive pill were invented (although they would not come into widespread use until the 1960s); working-class lesbian bar cultures in several large Canadian cities would be among the foundations of later feminist movements based on women’s sexual autonomy and freedom of movement; the American sexology and psychology disciplines, with their hostile diagnoses of female sexual deviance, became virtually hegemonic; and Alfred Kinsey’s second work, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, caused a ripple across North

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<sup>150</sup> Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 21-23; Mona Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal*, 81-82.

America with its claim that a substantial proportion of women were enjoying sexual intercourse outside marriage and that some were even engaging in sexual relations with other women.<sup>151</sup>

### **Lesbian and Bisexual Women**

Lesbian and bisexual women were, to most Canadians, virtually unknown entities until the postwar period and were invisible in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canadian culture. Because of nineteenth-century assumptions about women's sexual passivity, women were assumed until the twentieth century to be incapable of the same nature and degree of sexual passion as were men. It was therefore inconceivable to many that women could desire each other and engage in same-sex sexual activity.

Most historical scholarship on the subject of relationships between women in the nineteenth century concerns British and American women in what have been called "passionate" or "romantic" friendships. These relationships were primarily those of middle-class women, and were typified by intense emotional bonds, a sense of duty and fidelity, kissing, fondling, and sleeping together. Whether or not they had sexual relationships remains a matter of some dispute.<sup>152</sup> It may be said at this point, however, that society perceived romantic friendships as being without a sexual component. Had physical sexuality been revealed, the women concerned would have been condemned. As it was, for much of the nineteenth century, romantic friendships were not only tolerated but were approved of as a suitable preparation for married life.

The romantic friendship arose from a revival of same-sex love in the Renaissance. Influenced by the ideals of Platonism, which emphasized the importance of the soul over the body, writers began to assert the desirability of loyal and deep relationships between men. The

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<sup>151</sup> Alfred Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia & London: W.B. Saunders Co., 1953).

<sup>152</sup> This issue will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Three.

use of a deeply romantic language in which to describe these relationships often obscured any sexual element to them. Lillian Faderman argues that the Restoration trend of pederasty ended the innocence of this view of male friendships, but for female friends it continued for several centuries.<sup>153</sup> By the eighteenth century, large numbers of middle-class Englishwomen were using the passionate and semi-erotic language of the romantic friendship in their correspondence and other personal records to describe their feelings for other women.

Most of these letters and diaries used very passionate language, yet they were not interpreted as conveying a genital sexuality. Consequently, romantic friendships were assumed by many to be training young women in the very emotions and values they would need for a happy marital life: duty, fidelity and, most of all, deep devotion. For a young woman to have sought comfort from a male friend would have branded her a woman of ill repute, but such comforts from female friends were permitted. Unless women behaved in a way considered “unwomanly”—adopting supposedly “masculine” behaviours or occupations— or they cross-dressed, there was little likelihood that they would be thought lesbian.<sup>154</sup>

In the nineteenth century, romantic friendships were still popular and largely accepted, but questions now arose as to their respectability. The occasional case served to warn the British public that ladies might be getting up to unladylike things. In an 1811 case discussed extensively by Lillian Faderman, the Misses Woods and Pirie sued the grandmother of a pupil in the school they had run together in Scotland. The grandmother, Dame Helen Cumming Gordon, had accused the two schoolmistresses of “improper and criminal conduct” with each other, the result of which was that every parent removed their child from the school and Miss Woods and Miss Pirie lost their livelihoods. Because the schoolmistresses were able to use their class and notions

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<sup>153</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 67.

<sup>154</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 75, 84.

of respectable female innocence of things sexual to their advantage, their suit was successful.<sup>155</sup> Despite such threats to the acceptability of the romantic friendship, it remained in vogue in many segments of female society until at least the late nineteenth century.

In 1897, Havelock Ellis published his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, the fourth volume of which focused on what he termed “sexual inversion.” Ellis defined sexual inversion as a sexual impulse “organically and innately turned towards individuals of the same sex.” He differentiated this impulse from homosexuality by stating that the term homosexuality was “used more comprehensively of the general phenomena of sexual attraction between persons of the same sex, even if only of a slight and temporary character.”<sup>156</sup> Disputing the notion that homosexuality was less common in women than in men, Ellis argued that “it is as common in girls as in boys; it has been found, under certain conditions, to abound among women in colleges and convents and prisons, as well as under the ordinary conditions of society.”<sup>157</sup>

While acknowledging that women did have sexual desires, Ellis found it difficult to conceptualize lesbian desire within his theoretical structure. In *Sexual Inversion*, the fourth volume of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Ellis devoted much more attention to the male homosexual than to lesbian and bisexual women. He argued that most male homosexuals were not “effeminate,” but that most lesbians were “masculine.” This contradiction is a clear indication of Ellis’ unwillingness to see women as fully sexually autonomous beings: he saw men as the initiators in sexual matters, and women who desired other women must therefore be masculinized.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 147-149.

<sup>156</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex*, vol 4 (New York: Random House, 1937), 4.

<sup>157</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex*, vol 4, 195.

<sup>158</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society*, 147.

Ellis' views on the passionate or romantic friendship reflected larger social assumptions about relations between women. Careful to acknowledge that closeness between women was more common than between men, and that many passionate friendships were harmless and temporary relationships on the path towards heterosexual matrimony, he nevertheless clearly indicated that he thought that many forms of this closeness were "abnormal." He divided these "abnormal" women into two categories: those who were the love objects of truly inverted women, and the inverted women themselves. The former, Ellis thought, differed from "normal" women in that

they are not repelled or disgusted by lover-like advances from persons of their own sex. They are not usually attractive to the average man, though to this rule there are many exceptions. Their faces may be plain or ill-made, but not seldom they possess good figures: a point which is apt to carry more weight with the inverted woman than beauty of face. Their sexual impulses are seldom well marked, but they are of strongly affectionate nature. On the whole, they are women who are not very robust and well developed, physically or nervously, and who are not well adapted for childbearing, but who possess many excellent qualities, and they are always womanly.<sup>159</sup>

The truly inverted woman, in Ellis' scheme, was quite another species. She might or might not be a "mannish" woman, whom Ellis thought to imitate men in taste and habit without necessarily engaging in sexual "perversion." Her distinguishing feature was a distinct trace of masculinity as part of what he termed an "organic instinct," causing her to be attracted only to women.<sup>160</sup> The sexual invert could easily be identified, and not only by her attraction to women. She might also manifest certain abnormal habits and forms of attire, such as "a disdain for the petty feminine articles of the toilet" and a taste for cigarettes or cigars. The inverted woman usually could be spotted by the "brusque, energetic movements, the attitude of the arms, the direct speech, the inflexions of the voice, the masculine straightforwardness and sense of honor,

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<sup>159</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex*, vol 4, 222.

<sup>160</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex*, vol 4, 222-223.

and especially the attitude toward men, free from any suggestion either of shyness or audacity....”<sup>161</sup>

It is worth discussing Ellis at length because, as Lillian Faderman indicates, it was his work, and that of other sexologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that began to erode the earlier acceptance of passionate friendships between women. By the 1920s, even romantic friendships having no sexual element were increasingly classified as abnormal.<sup>162</sup> It became difficult for women who had grown up with an acceptance of such relationships now to express themselves openly, given the increasingly hostile climate. The sexological discourse was both employed and rejected by women seeking to understand their “non-procreative” sexuality. Women of the middle and upper classes, in particular, were known in the nineteenth century for adolescent crushes, which were known by many different slang words besides “crush”: “rave,” “spoon,” “pash” (for passion), “smash,” “gonage” (for gone on), and “flame.” Raves continued after they had been labelled by the sexologists as deviant, and some continued into adulthood.<sup>163</sup>

By the interwar period, societal toleration of the “romantic friendship” had eroded somewhat in the face of a medicalized discourse which portrayed relationships between women as pathological. Of particular interest to the sexologists, and subsequently to historians, is the relationship between first-wave feminism, women’s higher education and financial independence from men, and the emerging ideas about sexual inversion. Havelock Ellis and his contemporaries clearly identified feminism and women’s colleges as breeding-grounds for lesbianism. Reacting to female challenges to established gender norms, these men and their supporters used same-sex desire as a rubric within which to explain and discredit those women who transgressed the

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<sup>161</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex*, vol 4, 250.

<sup>162</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 49.

<sup>163</sup> Martha Vicinus, “Distance and Desire: English Boarding-School Friendships,” in Estelle Freedman, Barbara C. Gelpi, Susan L. Johnson, & Kathleen M. Weston, eds., *The Lesbian Issue: Essays from SIGNS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 47; 63-64.

acceptable boundaries of womanhood; in sexological theory, such women represented at the very least an unfortunate lack of femininity, if not a complete sexual inversion. It is certainly true that many early feminists, and many women in women's colleges, had relationships with one another, but this was due to opportunity rather than to the effects of the environment itself. Lillian Faderman shows clearly that "women who live by their brains" sometimes did form romantic relationships.<sup>164</sup>

Despite the pathology, however, the new image of the "lesbian" could be liberating for some, allowing as it did an "authorized" gender-transgressive identity. A new stereotype began to emerge in public discourse. As Esther Newton demonstrates,

from about 1900 on, this cross-gender figure became the public symbol of the new social/sexual category "lesbian."... From the perspective of Radclyffe Hall's generation...nineteenth-century models may have seemed more confining than liberating...Hall and many other feminists like her embraced, sometimes with ambivalence, the image of the mannish lesbian and the discourse of the sexologists about inversion primarily because they desperately wanted to break out of the asexual model of romantic friendship.<sup>165</sup>

The new model of the "sexual invert" at once eroded the earlier respectability of the "romantic friend" and posited a biologically-based sexual orientation and gender performance that was argued to be morally right and legal because of its essential nature. A lesbian and gay rights movement based on the biological arguments of the sexologists arose in the late nineteenth century, although it would not bear fruit, as it were, until the twentieth century.

It is difficult to determine precisely the degree to which sexological ideas about sexuality between women permeated Canadian society, and over what period.<sup>166</sup> Nevertheless, it can be

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<sup>164</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 204-230.

<sup>165</sup> Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," in *The Lesbian Issue: Essays from SIGNS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 10.

<sup>166</sup> For a discussion of the diversity of sexological texts available in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the responses to them, see Vern Bullough, "The Development of Sexology in the USA in the Early Twentieth Century," in Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, eds.,

said that the “sexual invert,” and Radclyffe Hall in particular, was known to at least some Canadians who may have been familiar with the controversy surrounding her 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, which was publicized in Canada as well as in Britain by the lengthy obscenity trial which surrounded it. The book’s main character, Stephen Gordon, is a self-identified “congenital invert.”<sup>167</sup> The book, and Hall herself, became an instant cause célèbre. Hall brought the sexologists’ terminology and stereotypes to the public in a manner hitherto unknown, and was perhaps the most influential lesbian writer well into the twentieth century. Her presentation of her main character was designed to elicit the support of a liberal public who, she thought, ought sensibly to see that homosexuality, as something innate to the individual, ought not to be condemned. She decided to “speak on behalf of a misjudged and misunderstood minority.”<sup>168</sup>

Hall presented her main character as morally upright, despite her biologically flawed nature, yet many were not persuaded by this characterization. After being turned down by several reputable publishers because of the book’s theme, Hall was finally successful in negotiating a contract with Cape for the book to be published with packaging that would ensure it being taken seriously. Despite Havelock Ellis’ endorsement of the book, and several positive reviews, the Home Secretary demanded its withdrawal. Subsequently, the publishers of the book and the owners of the premises in which copies were held were brought to trial. *The Well of Loneliness* was declared to be obscene and was ordered destroyed, and an appeal was

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*Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science: The History of Attitudes to Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 303-322, and Lesley Hall, “‘The English Have Hot-Water Bottles’: The Morgantic Marriage Between Sexology and Medicine in Britain Since William Acton” in the same volume, 350-366.

<sup>167</sup> Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Cape, 1928).

<sup>168</sup> Una Troubridge, “The Life and Death of Radclyffe Hall,” in Richard Ormrod, *Una Troubridge: The Friend of Radclyffe Hall* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1985), 163.

unsuccessful.<sup>169</sup> In the United States, *The Well of Loneliness* was prosecuted in 1929 but was acquitted after a successful defence. In addition to newspaper coverage of the trial, reviews of *The Well of Loneliness* were published in a variety of periodicals, including *The Canadian Forum*.

*The Well of Loneliness* was reviewed in Canada by the liberal journalist S. H. Hooke, who wrote against the censorship of the book. In Hall's defence, Hooke commented that "It is a passionate cry of protest from the side of the abnormal individual against the blind and unreasonable cruelty of society to the unusual type; a protest against the denial to the invert of all emotional outlet." Concerning the ban of Hall's book, he observed that "As a result of the ban...thousands of people have read the book and become aware of the facts of inversion who would ordinarily never have seen the book, nor become cognizant of the facts which it deals with."<sup>170</sup> Due largely to the extensive publicity surrounding the banning of *The Well of Loneliness*, it became somewhat of a symbol of homosexuality in the eyes of many North Americans in the 1920s and 1930s, and became the standard by which people either distanced themselves from or identified with the "sexual invert."

Lesbians themselves had mixed feelings about *The Well of Loneliness*. Faderman writes that it remained popular well into the 1950s and provided some butch women with a role model in its portrayal of the masculine Stephen Gordon character and her relationship with the feminine Mary.<sup>171</sup> Not all lesbians were happy with its portrayal of lesbian relationships, however. An American sociological study of lesbians undertaken in the 1920s showed that many lesbians thought that the book showed homosexuality in a poor light.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Richard Ormrod, *Una Troubridge: The Friend of Radclyffe Hall*, 176-184.

<sup>170</sup> *Canadian Forum* 9, 103 (April 1929), 243-244. See also Steven Maynard, "Radclyffe Hall in Canada," *Centre/Fold* 6 (Spring 1994), 9.

<sup>171</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 173.

<sup>172</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 322.

It is difficult to determine the readership of such novels as *The Well of Loneliness* and thus of the range and type of lesbian models in the interwar era. Lesbian magazine fiction may have been more available to women than novels such as Hall's because of the growing popularity of magazine fiction as a genre. In the early twentieth century, before the advent of Freudian theory, much of that fiction was quite frank, for the period, about physical affection between women. Lesbian fiction appeared in such publications as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Harper's*, and *Strand*. The stories often involved an older and a younger student at a girls' school or women's college. Lillian Faderman dismisses the notion that the passionate language of such stories can be attributed to the sentimentality of the age, arguing instead that "the female character was emotionally touched by another female."<sup>173</sup> She argues that the physical affection portrayed in these stories is without the self-consciousness it would later acquire in the post-Freudian era after the First World War.<sup>174</sup>

Some sexological works were available at least to some Canadians, sometimes through subcultural networks. Elsa Gidlow, who was born in England but grew up in Quebec, confirms that these works were important in her gaining an understanding of her lesbianism. As a teenager during the First World War, she set up a literary group, through which she met Roswell George Mills, who

apparently recognized immediately my temperament. He said, "Do you know about Sappho?" I don't remember if I'd heard anything about her, but I went to the library, found writings about her and translations of her fragments, and immediately became interested. Through Roswell—all blessings—I started to hear about some literature that would lead me to some knowledge about myself and other people like me. Other than the literary, I think the first books I read were Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex*, and Kraft-Ebbing [sic], and Lombroso—and all these were revelatory to me because I could have no doubt, having read them, of where my orientation lay. Though they wrote on a level of morbid psychology, and I couldn't accept the morbidity side of it, it was very

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<sup>173</sup> Lillian Faderman, "Lesbian Magazine Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century," *Journal of Popular Culture* 11 (Summer 1977-Spring 1978) 802-803.

<sup>174</sup> Lillian Faderman, "Lesbian Magazine Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century," 805; 809.

interesting to read all this and find out there had been other people like me in the world—and a great many of them, a large number distinguished and outstanding, even if they weren't acceptable in ordinary life.<sup>175</sup>

Together they read Ellis' *Psychology of Sex*, "such volumes as we were able to get our hands on, as it was mainly available to doctors." Another member of their group, Louis Gross, a graduate medical student at McGill University, helped them to obtain some of the "forbidden" books.<sup>176</sup>

Some of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexological works were available to the public, although they were not widely advertised. In *Between the Acts*, Kevin Porter and Jeffrey Weeks reveal that many of the gay men they interviewed had read the small body of work available to them in the early twentieth century: the works of Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis and J.A. Symonds. They argue that works such as these provided gay men with a vocabulary through which they could give meaning to their feelings and recognize that they were not alone.<sup>177</sup>

The "queer" or "perverse" reading of sexological definitions was widespread. By "queer" or "perverse" I mean the reading of a text, a norm, or an identity in a way not intended by its creator(s). Bonnie Zimmerman defines a perverse reading as one in which the reader is someone who is "highly conscious of her own agency, who takes an active role in shaping the text she reads in accordance with her perspective of the world."<sup>178</sup> Such an approach was certainly true of many lesbians and gay men in the early twentieth century, who saw in the sexologists' terms a ready-made defence against charges of immorality and vice. If

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<sup>175</sup> Nancy and Casey Adair, *Word is Out*, 17.

<sup>176</sup> Nancy Adair and Casey Adair, *Word Is Out*, 17; Elsa Gidlow, *Elsa: I Come With My Songs*, 72.

<sup>177</sup> Kevin Porter and Jeffrey Weeks, eds., *Between the Acts*, 3.

<sup>178</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, "Perverse Reading: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature," in *Sexual Practice/Textual Theory: Lesbian Cultural Criticism*, ed. Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 135-149.

homosexuality were biological, if it were an unchanging condition within a human organism, then moral concerns were irrelevant, and legal punishment and social persecution of homosexuality could not be justified. Rapidly, gay men and lesbians began using the sexological definitions to advance their individual and community rights as best they could.<sup>179</sup>

By the twenties, more authors were writing about homosexuality, and their works were being read by a broader section of the public, although they were not popularized. The extent of the availability of such material to a lay readership is unknown, but there are indications that some sexological works were being read by heterosexual as well as homosexual people. Writing in 1927 to her friend Helene Fraser, mother of Frieda Fraser, Nettie Bryant wrote regarding the lesbian relationship of Frieda and Edith “Bud” Bickerton Williams

If I can only transfer to you, unbroken, my dear old friend, the vision which stands in my own mind with increasingly persistent clearness and vigour as a sure, safe, and upright method of meeting this rare problem—and, what is more, though God forbid that it should fail!—it seems to me looking at it in every way possible - it seems to me to be the one and only way which will bring everything around in the end!

As to Bud, the reaction that I have felt in realizing that she was not after all of the nature of that repulsive abnormal creature I heard of in that book, has resulted in a more tolerant leniency (perhaps that is expressing it a bit too strongly—as it might seem to you)—even you yourself could not help being conscious if you had read the thing!<sup>180</sup>

It is unclear precisely to which book she was referring, but Nettie, in her guidance to Helene on how to deal with the relationship between Frieda and Bud, clearly reveals the availability of at least some works attesting to the existence of “abnormal” sexualities.

Also gaining popularity after the First World War were psychological analyses of homosexuality. Henry L. Minton argues that Havelock Ellis’ “concept of individual and cultural

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<sup>179</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 58-59.

<sup>180</sup> University of Toronto Archives (hereafter UTA), Fraser Family Personal Records, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Box 001, File 17, Nettie M. Bryant to Helene Fraser, 23 April 1927. Emphasis in original.

relativism in sex and his tolerance for homosexuality had no impact on the medical community.”<sup>181</sup> It was Freud who had the larger influence, at least on American paradigms. By 1900, medical professionals were beginning to classify sexual deviations more rigorously. Sexual inversion, gender inversion, and other forms of sexual “deviancy” became more discrete categories, each with its own set of characteristics. Freud furthered this specification by differentiating more clearly between the sexual aim and the sexual object. Sexual object was eventually to become the more important category in the medical classification of sexuality.<sup>182</sup> The sexual aim is the act towards which the sexual instinct tends. The “normal” sexual aim, in Freud’s view, is “the union of the genitals in the act known as copulation.” Further, one of the perversions of the sexual aim is the extension “in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union...”<sup>183</sup> This includes the sexual use of mouth and anus and, although Freud is not specific about lesbian sexual activity, the penetration of the vagina by anything other than the penis. Sexual object, on the other hand, refers to “the person from whom sexual attraction proceeds...”<sup>184</sup>

Freud’s theories about sexuality began a slow process of separation of definitions of homosexuality from those of congenital sexual and gender inversion, yet this change occurred in a very piecemeal fashion. There remained considerable slippage between the two types of

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<sup>181</sup> Henry L. Minton, “Femininity in Men and Masculinity in Women: American Psychiatry and Psychology Portray Homosexuality in the 1930’s,” *Journal of Homosexuality* vol. 13 no. 1 (Fall 1986), 8.

<sup>182</sup> George Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: The Changing Medical Conceptualization of Female ‘Deviance’,” in Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, eds., *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 92-93.

<sup>183</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (New York: Avon, 1962), 22; 38.

<sup>184</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 22-23.

theories. As Chauncey suggests, even Freud's followers in the United States continued to mix his psychological interpretations of homosexuality with earlier, congenital ones.<sup>185</sup>

It is difficult to determine with absolute accuracy the relative degrees of influence of British and American psychology and psychiatry on the Canadian medical profession before the Second World War. It is likely that Canada was increasingly influenced by American trends. American psychiatrists and psychologists writing in the 1930s associated homosexuality with cross-gender identification, building somewhat on earlier assumptions about inversion. Interwar interpretations did not always have an essentialist basis, however. Psychiatrist George W. Henry, in his 1937 study of "Psychogenic Factors in Overt Homosexuality," concluded that psychological causes could exacerbate any existing latent tendencies towards homosexuality. In particular, deviation from prescribed gender roles could lead to homosexual tendencies.<sup>186</sup>

It was the scale developed by Terman and Miles in their study of sexual characteristics, published in 1936, which set the tone of medical interpretations of homosexuality until at least the 1960s. The study examined "normal" and "abnormal" sample groups to assess the degree to which the sexes differed in "instinctual and emotional traits, such as sentiments, interests, attitudes, and modes of behavior."<sup>187</sup> The result was a scale of M-F (masculinity-femininity) scores which underwrote many future assessments of gender. Homosexuality was defined in relation to these scores. Whereas it was the passive men in male same-sex relationships who were held to be ultra-feminine and thus the "inverts," it was the active women in lesbian

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<sup>185</sup> George Chauncey, "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: The Changing Medical Conceptualization of Female 'Deviance'," 102.

<sup>186</sup> Henry L. Minton, "Femininity in Men and Masculinity in Women: American Psychiatry and Psychology Portray Homosexuality in the 1930's," 2.

<sup>187</sup> Henry L. Minton, "Femininity in Men and Masculinity in Women: American Psychiatry and Psychology Portray Homosexuality in the 1930's," 9.

relationships who were held to be the “inverts” and the passive women who were simply “perverts.” Note the continuing influence of earlier sexological ideas of sexual inversion.

One must remember that the works discussed above, both medical and literary, were probably read by only a small proportion of the general public. Medical, sexological, and psychological works on sexuality increasingly informed the discourses of the medical and psychological professions. It may have been the case that the definitions and terminologies of sexuality used by these professionals with their patients gradually changed in response to these works, but it is impossible to determine without access to medical case files the degree to which this occurred in the period under study. In addition, one must remember that the descriptors developed in these professions may have been used in patients’ files but would not necessarily have been mentioned to patients and families themselves, thus keeping the discourse restricted to the medical profession. A few members of the general public, most particularly those deliberately seeking scientific explanations for their own sexuality, gained access to sexological and psychological works, but it is highly unlikely that their use was widespread.

Even novels and magazine fiction would not necessarily have been read widely in the early twentieth century in particular. While by this time the majority of Canadians were functionally literate, social class, wealth, and available leisure time would have affected the degree to which people were able to read or interested in reading such works. Reading for pleasure rather than solely for information was not yet a widespread practice among all classes. One must therefore be careful not to assume that the rapid expansion in published works on sexuality can indicate a public educated on the subject. Such education was most likely highly class specific and perhaps even gender specific. As this study will demonstrate, publicly-available discourse about sexuality was very limited in the early twentieth century, and even in the postwar era.

One of the most significant events of the twentieth century for lesbians and gay men, both in terms of the formation of communities and in changes in the degree and nature of public

knowledge of homosexuality, was the Second World War. Those who “came out” in the 1940s portray the war as a fundamental break with the past, arguing that it was the bringing together of thousands of gay men and, to a lesser extent, lesbians in the military and in war work which propelled them rapidly towards the gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Most of the literature on lesbians, gay men, and the war focuses on the United States. Allan Bérubé’s *Coming Out Under Fire* argues that, because the law in the United States virtually ignored lesbianism, and because the military had built its anti-homosexual policies on the basis of the law, lesbians were able to enter the military undetected. It was not until late 1942 that the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps, in response to a letter impugning the reputations of forty-eight women, including three lesbians, required recruiters to examine applicants’ local reputations and assess them in relation to nine categories of “undesirable habits and traits of character,” one of which was “homosexual tendencies.”<sup>188</sup> New psychiatric screening procedures were developed to deal with female as well as male homosexuality.

Bérubé’s interviews of six lesbian veterans and six lesbian civilians showed that lesbians, like gay men, found various ways to circumvent the regulations and, once in the military, to socialize with each other. Many lesbians made the service clubs their home and, while they had to be careful not to be too overtly affectionate in public, they managed to form wide social networks based solely on their same-sex attraction.<sup>189</sup> As GIs, lesbian women could also go into the various port cities housing military bases and walk around, alone or in groups, without the same kind of condemnation risked by women before the war.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Plume, 1990), 28.

<sup>189</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 102-103.

<sup>190</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 106-108.

In Canada's armed services, anti-homosexual policies were also employed. The Canadian military placed homosexuality under the heading "psychiatric disorders." Canadian servicemen and servicewomen were discharged under this heading, rather than being openly discharged as homosexual.<sup>191</sup> Because of this, we do not have precise figures for the number of women and men discharged from the services during the war because of sexuality. Ruth Roach Pierson's *"They're Still Women After All"* confirms that the recruitment campaigns for the Canadian Women's Army Corps stopped short in their advertising of any image that might suggest camaraderie to the point of lesbianism, because homosexuality could be grounds for a discharge from the military.<sup>192</sup> What her research has not revealed is the degree to which military service was attractive to lesbians regardless of the advertising, and the degree to which lesbians were persecuted in the military.

In the United States, the brief period of wartime community-building came to an abrupt end for lesbians and gays not because of the end of the war and the disbanding of the women's services, but rather because of the postwar tendency to emphasize conformity to the matrimonial, heterosexual family. The Cold War years were difficult for gay men and lesbians who, despite the anti-homosexual policies of the military, had enjoyed a burgeoning social world and sense of freedom in the armed services. Now, in the late 1940s and the 1950s, the nation's attention would be drawn to the rebuilding of the family and the expansion of the state further into the private lives of Americans. In the case of gay men, campaigns were mounted equating homosexuality with sexual psychopathology and with communism, both things regarded as fundamental threats to the sanctity of the American family.<sup>193</sup> While these campaigns focused mainly on men, lesbians were also the target of scrutiny and persecution. Those women who

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<sup>191</sup> Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire*, 150.

<sup>192</sup> Ruth Roach Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All"*, 158.

<sup>193</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 258-259.

chose to remain in the military (an option in the United States, but not in Canada) were portrayed as a deviant group and were easily stereotyped as lesbian. During the peacetime years from 1947 to 1950, the US military discharged homosexual personnel at triple the wartime rate of discharge, and some of the discharges were of women.<sup>194</sup>

The postwar campaigns against gay men and lesbians were also a feature of the Canadian political landscape. For example, in one of the more absurd moments in Canadian-American political relations, Canada took the lead from the United States in instigating the weeding out of homosexuals from the civil service, because of their allegedly greater emotional instability and susceptibility to blackmail. Relying on the scientific opinion of Robert Wake, a Carleton University psychology professor who had investigated the various technological means of identifying homosexuals, Ottawa approved funding in 1963 for the Pupillary Response Test, or “fruit machine,” a device intended to detect homosexual response to visual stimuli.<sup>195</sup> While theoretically capable of testing for homosexuality in both men and women, the Pupillary Response Test was used primarily on men. The results were hardly conclusive, however, and the project was dropped.<sup>196</sup>

The more typical approach to weeding out homosexuals was a more traditional investigatory technique relying on information-gathering and the interrogation of those deemed to be sexually suspect and their associates. The RCMP was primarily responsible for this investigation. The Canadian version of the campaign was, Robinson and Kimmel argue, considerably more humane than its American equivalent, because those investigated did not have to testify at public “loyalty hearings,” and were dealt with behind closed doors. Nevertheless,

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<sup>194</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 262-263.

<sup>195</sup> Daniel J. Robinson and David Kimmel, “The Queer Career of Homosexual Security Vetting in Cold War Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 75, 3 (September 1994), 340-341.

<sup>196</sup> Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire*, 177-181. It proved very difficult for the researchers to find gay men willing to undergo the test, and lesbians were even less forthcoming.

the investigation resulted in the dismissal of over 150 people from government employment, and many more were transferred to other departments or were asked to resign. The investigation was broadened to include people outside the government, and by 1968 the number of suspected homosexuals on file at the RCMP had risen to 9000, of whom only one-third were federal public servants.<sup>197</sup>

Exactly how many women were persecuted under the government's anti-homosexual measures is unclear. Gary Kinsman reveals that, although gay men were known to inform on each other, lesbians resisted the investigators, and lesbian circles were thus not easily penetrated. Nevertheless, the RCMP managed to build files on a large number of lesbians as well as on gay men.<sup>198</sup> Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile are at time of writing undertaking a substantial research project into the security campaign in Canada. In their preliminary report, they indicate that several factors resulted in fewer women being persecuted under the Cold War policies. The texts used by the government and the military to frame the security policies, and the policies themselves, focused primarily on men. Women in the public sector were also largely concentrated in areas where security was not as much a concern. This changed, however, as more security information came to be typed and processed by the growing numbers of female secretarial and clerical staff in the postwar era.<sup>199</sup>

Psychology and psychiatry were vital parts of the postwar re-emphasis of heteronormativity. Before the war, "medical and psychiatric investigations of homosexuality were primarily limited to the pages of professional journals, while the general public's

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<sup>197</sup> Daniel J. Robinson and David Kimmel, "The Queer Career of Homosexual Security Vetting in Cold War Canada," 323-324; 343; Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire*, 174.

<sup>198</sup> Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire*, 175.

<sup>199</sup> Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile, *"In the Interests of the State": The Anti-gay, Anti-lesbian National Security Campaign in Canada: A Preliminary Research Report* (Sudbury, Ontario: Laurentian University, 1998).

perception of the homosexual—usually male—was shaped by sensational news stories about the sex criminal or religious morality tales about the sex sinner.”<sup>200</sup> In the postwar period, medical opinion on homosexuality rapidly infiltrated public thinking via the mainstream media. Much of that opinion rested on assumptions about the intimate link between homosexuality and abnormal or unhealthy family life. The most famous of the American psychologists to promulgate this notion was Frank Caprio, whose works *Female Homosexuality: A Psychodynamic Study of Lesbianism* and *Variations in Sexual Behavior* posited lesbianism as fundamentally pathological.<sup>201</sup>

To Caprio, lesbians were subject to a personality disorder and were undisciplined women who had rejected their proper roles as wives and mothers in favour of the masculine role. He argued, “Lesbians suffer from a multiplicity of neurotic health complaints. As a group they do not understand their unconscious. Hence they find it difficult to discipline themselves successfully.”<sup>202</sup> In Caprio’s view, lesbianism was the inevitable result of the emancipation of women, but it was also allied to dysfunction within the family.

A more positive, although hardly unproblematic, interpretation was held by Alfred Kinsey. Kinsey saw sexuality as more of a continuum than a dichotomy. His interest in the tremendous diversity of human sexual practices was expressed in two large studies, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, published in 1948, and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*,

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<sup>200</sup> Kate Adams, “Making the World Safe for the Missionary Position: Images of the Lesbian in Post-World War II America,” in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, eds. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York & London: New York University Press, 1990), 264.

<sup>201</sup> Frank Caprio, *Female Homosexuality: A Psychodynamic Study of Lesbianism* (New York: Citadel, 1954), and *Variations in Sexual Behavior* (New York: Citadel, 1955).

<sup>202</sup> Frank Caprio, *Female Homosexuality*, 305.

published in 1953.<sup>203</sup> Kinsey argued that there was no direct link between sexual activity and identity, and his data revealed that 37% of men and 28% of women had had sexual experience to orgasm with someone of the same sex at least once in their lives, and that many more had been sexually attracted to others of the same sex.”<sup>204</sup> His works served to illustrate that same-sex behaviour was much more common than most North Americans had thought (or wished to believe) and they have since been used to campaign for legal and social recognition of gay men and lesbians. It is Kinsey’s work which gave rise to the “one in ten” slogan still with us today. North Americans were not ready for Kinsey’s statistics; his research funding was withdrawn and he came under investigation for his seeming to support activities deemed un-American and threatening to the sanctity of both family and nation.

Both lesbianism and bisexuality were linked to broader disruptive trends in postwar American life. The Beat generation in the 1950s allowed and, indeed, argued for sexual freedom and experimentation, which often included same-sex experience. Only just emerging in this period was an awareness that young girls and women were among those who were rebelling against normative gender and sexuality.<sup>205</sup> The visible emergence of postwar lesbian

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<sup>203</sup> Alfred Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia & London: W.B. Saunders Co., 1948) & *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia & London: W.B. Saunders Co., 1953).

<sup>204</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, 242; Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 140.

Kinsey was not particularly interested in rigid definitions of sexual preference, claiming as he did that there existed a range of human sexuality, from fully heterosexual in activity (the Kinsey 0) to fully homosexual (the Kinsey 6). Nevertheless, his data was used by many to support a dichotomous view of sexuality, leaving bisexual people somewhere in a blurry and vague middle ground. American society and, indeed, many scholars writing about sexuality seem not to have heeded his warning that “one must learn to recognize every combination of heterosexuality and homosexuality in the histories of various individuals.” Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, 617.

<sup>205</sup> Wini Breines, “The ‘Other’ Fifties: Beats and Bad Girls,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 383-383, 392.

communities created the image of a threatening group where previously only individual lesbians had threatened the social order. It was the “many postwar experts and their popularizers [who] sought to give these women a face and a name that the public could recognize for the neurotic, pathological, faulty adjustment that the experts believed it to be....”<sup>206</sup>

In an examination of popular psychology in postwar Canada, Mona Gleason demonstrates that psychologists, wishing to sustain the professional prestige established by their employment in the military, broadened their scope in order to take psychology into the innermost recesses of the public mind.<sup>207</sup> Via books, newspapers, magazines and radio, psychologists gradually increased their hold on the Canadian psyche. A crucial component of the psychologists’ work in the postwar period was “educating Canadians in the importance of achieving and sustaining healthy personality development by popularizing their advice and making it accessible.”<sup>208</sup>

The 1950s and 1960s also saw the methods developed to detect homosexuals in the military extended to a broader cross-section of Canadian society. Canadian culture, like that of the United States, was increasingly influenced by the new popularity of Freudian-derived theories. As Kinsman notes, Freudian thought enshrined concerns about proper gender behaviour in a number of institutions.<sup>209</sup> At the same time as Canada was attempting to reduce

<sup>206</sup> Donna Penn, “The Sexualized Woman,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 368.

<sup>207</sup> Mona Gleason, “Psychology and the Construction of the ‘Normal’ Family in Postwar Canada, 1945-60,” *Canadian Historical Review* 78, 3 (Sept 1997), 447. Donna Penn has argued that the same process occurred in the United States, where “After the war, the psychiatric world was in a position to consolidate its power as an agent of cultural authority.” Donna Penn, “The Sexualized Woman,” 363.

<sup>208</sup> Mona Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal*, 83.

<sup>209</sup> Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire*, 160-161.

the homosexual “threat” to national security, the government was refining the Criminal Code. In 1949, a federal commission was set up to eliminate inconsistencies in the law in relation to sexual crimes. In 1953-54, sexual offences were moved from “offences against morality” to a new section called “Sexual Offences.” In this new definition of sexual crimes, “gross indecency” could be committed by anyone, whereas previously it had been exclusively a male crime. It technically now covered lesbians and heterosexual people.<sup>210</sup> Few women were ever prosecuted under this law for lesbian activity, but police harassment of lesbians did occur, especially in relation to lesbian bars in urban areas.

Postwar attitudes towards lesbians were not as hostile as those towards gay men, but it was certainly the case that the public was becoming more aware of lesbianism. It would not be until the end of the period under study that the first homophile organizations were founded in Canada.<sup>211</sup> Lesbian visibility before the 1960s mainly took the form of the public lesbian community of the bar scene in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. The general public, not usually privy to the goings-on of the bar scene, obtained information via newspapers, magazines, the radio, and advice literature. There was little said about lesbianism in these sources until the late 1950s, however. As Mary Louise Adams points out about advice literature for teens, homosexuals were stereotypically male, and they were adults.<sup>212</sup> Same-sex crushes were approved of for girls, provided they were on people who were worthy of respect and provided they were kept under control and did not involve physical contact.

The rather enigmatic expressions of attitudes towards lesbianism should not be taken as demonstrating a lack of antagonism, however. What must be remembered is that attitudes can be formed by default, as it were, because of the strength of heteronormative modelling and the lack

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<sup>210</sup> Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire*, 169.

<sup>211</sup> Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire*, 230-235.

<sup>212</sup> Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 92.

of positive and viable alternative models. The Canadian public knew full well that heterosexuality was the ideal and that there was a difference between close female friendships and attachments that were “too close” and might be “unnatural.” Homoerotic desires had their place in childhood and adolescent development, according to the theories promulgated in the 1950s and 1960s, but they were steps on the path to heterosexual maturity.<sup>213</sup> That their legitimacy was not extended into adult life was a clear message to parents and children alike that homosexuality was not healthy.

While it is impossible to determine with certainty the proportion of the Canadian population who had heard of lesbian relationships, it can be argued that by the middle of the twentieth century images of same-sex relationships and social worlds were increasingly available through mainstream media. Lesbians became the subject of many a magazine or newspaper article. While some of these were vaguely sympathetic, many were lurid in their hyperbole about the “homosexual lifestyle.” With the growth of the “yellow press” in the 1950s, scare-mongering about homosexuality became *de rigueur*.

The scandal sheets printed local and international material about lesbians and gay men. In 1955, for example, the *Justice Weekly* printed a story about two London, England, women who had married. Violet Jones, who had desired for some time to change her sex, dressed as a man and married Joan Lee. The judge’s comment to the two “lesbians” was that “the fact remains that you made a grave false statement to cover your unnatural passions with a false air of respectability.”<sup>214</sup> They were fined £25 each. Such stories, imported from outside Canada, served to titillate the reading public, but simultaneously served to foster community awareness among the very people being described.

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<sup>213</sup> Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 92-93.

<sup>214</sup> *Justice Weekly*, 15 January 1955, 14.

By 1964, homosexuality had become a more widespread concern. The *Telegram* published a series entitled “Society and the Homosexual,” which aimed, after only two months’ research on the subject, to present “accurate” information to the public. The first article in the series quoted the Toronto Forensic Clinic as believing that there were 15,000 active homosexual men in the metropolitan Toronto area, and a further 150,000 who were latent homosexuals or bisexuals. The article added that “This deviate population is swelled by 6,000 Lesbians and 30,000 other women who live outwardly heterosexual lives but are sporadic or latent homosexuals.” The article then went on to chronicle the torrid goings-on in a homosexual club on Yonge Street, where “One pale, ethereal looking Lesbian danced with another who looked and moved like a sack of potatoes rolling downhill. To the homosexual, particularly, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”<sup>215</sup>

The newspaper reporter then tied the problem of homosexuality to the perceived breakdown in family life. Reporting that Toronto experts disagreed with rumours that the proportion of male homosexuals to heterosexuals had increased since the war, the paper nevertheless stated that the time was ripe for an increase. The cause? The author stated that “The patriarchal society has become the matriarchal society and the lines of familial authority are blurring.”<sup>216</sup> Fears about the consequences of women’s paid employment and changes in the structure of the heterosexual relationship were manifest in attitudes towards homosexuality, which was thought to be the result of poor parenting. Postwar concerns about domineering mothers and weak or absent fathers were expressed in a variety of media. Most images were of male homosexuality, but lesbians were more often mentioned as the 1950s and 1960s progressed.

It would be inaccurate to describe the postwar portrayal of homosexuality as uniformly hostile, however. While clearly the majority of opinion regarding homosexuality, and most

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<sup>215</sup> *The Telegram*, 11 April 1964, 7.

<sup>216</sup> *The Telegram*, 11 April 1964, 7.

particularly gay men, was negative, there was some degree of tolerance towards homosexuals provided their behaviour was not too “extreme” in the eyes of the public. As Eric Sutcliffe suggests, effeminate gay men were seen as somewhat humorous and were ridiculed by the tabloid press, but their gender transgressions were generally tolerated provided they were not extreme.<sup>217</sup> Said tolerance did not necessarily extend very far into the general public or other forms of media. More “respectable” newspapers carried stories more focused on the “problem” of homosexuality.

In the period 1920-1965, Ontario was the site of considerable gay and lesbian community-building and, indeed, of regulatory and discursive reactions to it. While Montréal also had a significant gay and lesbian population, it was Toronto that became the destination for many a young lesbian seeking others of her kind, especially after the Second World War. Police and municipal authorities had increasingly to deal with the presence of larger numbers of lesbians on the streets, in clubs and bars, and in residential areas. Ontario was also the site of much mainstream and medical publishing on the subject of deviant sexualities in the post-war period. As Mary Louise Adams argues, Toronto was the centre of English-language publishing, broadcasting, and cultural production” in Canada and was “entwined with the definition of ‘national culture’.”<sup>218</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the scholarship on lesbian culture in Canada before the gay rights movement focuses on Toronto. Very little has thus far been written about the lesbian and gay communities of Vancouver and other British Columbia towns. It was not until the mid-1960s that Vancouver newspapers began publishing stories and editorials on gay and lesbian issues.<sup>219</sup> The availability across Canada of material published in

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<sup>217</sup> Eric Sutliff, “Sex Fiends or Swish Kids?: Gay Men in *Hush Free Press*, 1946-1956,” in *Gendered Pasts: Historical Essays in Femininity and Masculinity in Canada*, eds. Kathryn McPherson, Cecilia Morgan, and Nancy Forestell (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999), 159.

<sup>218</sup> Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 5.

<sup>219</sup> Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire*, 252.

Ontario, and the nationwide use of advice literature and films about childhood and adolescent development, however, would have ensured that British Columbians were similarly exposed to theories about homosexuality and its threat to the Canadian livelihood.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that sexuality was a focus of social anxiety throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Heterosexual sexuality remained the only acceptable form of sexuality, although even the content of heterosexual relations changed. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed a change from the norm of female sexual passivity to the new ideal of the companionate marriage, in which female sexuality was somewhat permitted, to postwar fears about youthful female heterosexuality gone awry. Between 1910 and 1965, the period under study, female sexuality was increasingly accepted as something that existed—as compared to the previous century—albeit still at a lesser strength than male sexuality, and its description, theorizing, and policing became the focus of many an advice book, magazine article, and psychological report.

The new century also witnessed the increasing recognition of another kind of female sexuality, one not sanctioned by church or state and one increasingly to be defined in the terms of the new, psychological discourse. Lesbianism began to be discussed by sexologists, doctors, and the judiciary in the nineteenth century. The respectability of the romantic friendship was beginning to erode, and any relationship between women which went beyond close friendship was now deemed pathological. Sexologists and medical doctors began to suspect that relationships between women once thought healthy and non-sexual were in fact unhealthy.

This new, medicalized discourse was not necessarily adhered to by the majority in North American society, as the works in which it was promulgated were not widely available. Most people, until the terms of the discourse began to make their way into mainstream media, regarded

homosexuality as unnatural but used non-medical terms to describe it. Further, in the minds of many, homosexuality was likely thought of as a male phenomenon. The limiting of the new discourse to a small, educated elite in society meant that the framework of the romantic friendship and its language could survive in some circles to the middle of the century. As will be shown in Chapter Four, middle-class women continued to maintain these kinds of relationships even in the face of increasingly negative stereotyping of them. Provided that physical sexuality could be kept secret or was not present, a relationship could still be expressed in the terms of the romantic friendship without it arousing hostile reaction. Outsiders might suspect, but they could not prove that a relationship was of the “pathological” variety.

How, then, *did* people understand the female same-sex relationships in their midst? It can be argued that many North Americans in the early to mid twentieth century already had a rubric within which they could simultaneously acknowledge and *explain away* a relationship between two women who lived together. The spinster, although not meeting dominant standards of heterosexual, matrimonial femininity, was a largely non-threatening person unless that spinsterhood were accompanied by political activism.<sup>220</sup> Spinsters were generally conceived of as non-sexual. As Leila Rupp indicates in her discussion of the same-sex relationship of her aunt, the outside world could also conceive of such a woman as a “maiden aunt.”<sup>221</sup>

Just as many people did not view or treat Rupp’s aunt and her partner as a couple, so too most North Americans would not have recognized, let alone have an explanatory model within which to understand, a relationship between two women. Several factors account for this. First, despite the new recognition in the twentieth century that women were sexual beings, most North

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<sup>220</sup> For information on the attitudes towards spinsters and on the links made between spinsterhood and politics, see Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: feminism and sexuality, 1880-1930* (London & Boston: Pandora Press, 1985).

<sup>221</sup> Leila J. Rupp, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 5.

Americans, as Rupp points out, thought in terms of love in relation to women and sex in relation to men.<sup>222</sup> Much of the focus of legal and social policing of same-sex relations was therefore on men rather than women. Further, the tendency to suspect and look for physical sexuality as the crucial aspect of a relationship is a distinctly modern phenomenon.<sup>223</sup> It may be that earlier relationships need to be understood differently, and it may be that the North American public before the 1960s, less inclined to focus on the genital, could easily separate physical same-sex behaviour, framed as either pathological or immoral, and those relationships which seemed from the outside to be, or actually were, without a physical component.

After the Second World War, and particularly in the late 1950s and the 1960s, homosexuality was discussed more frequently in the mainstream media. Although male homosexuality remained the primary focus, the newspaper and magazine articles on homosexuality did discuss lesbianism. Many authors took the approach that the Canadian public needed to be informed of a considerable threat to Canadian society, and particularly to the Canadian family. Although some articles attempted to take a balanced and sympathetic approach, many portrayed homosexuality in the most negative ways possible and linked the alleged burgeoning of homosexuality to broader postwar crises and concerns.

The degree to which these new, mainstream articles were read by the public is unknown. What can reasonably be said is that information about and stereotypes of homosexuality were increasingly available and would have informed public attitudes to a degree not previously possible. A stronger influence on public attitudes may have been new forms of advice literature for children and adolescents, and for the parents raising them. By the postwar era, advice literature was more openly acknowledging homosexuality and was addressing it as a risk factor. And while many of the books and films available to young people and parents may have portrayed same-sex attractions as acceptable during development, they uniformly portrayed physical exploration of

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<sup>222</sup> Leila J. Rupp, *A Desired Past*, 5.

<sup>223</sup> See Rupp, *A Desired Past*, 7-10 and Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 17-18.

those attractions and their continuation into adult life as unhealthy. Heterosexuality was portrayed in this important form of discourse as the ideal and the norm, and positive alternatives were not available.

The following chapters explore the meanings and consequences of discourses of sexuality for thirty women in Canada between 1910 and 1965. In particular, they examine the ways in which women, subject to discourses which defined them in relation to acceptable and unacceptable expressions of sexual desire and gender performance, constructed their sexual subjectivity. How were lesbian and bisexual women to form positive images of their sexuality when the predominant view of the medical profession and society in general was that they were sick and abnormal? In a period when sex became the thing to be known about oneself, how did women come to “know” themselves as sexual subjects? Was it possible for women to absorb, transform, and even create sexual discourses which enabled them to explore their sexual desires?

## CHAPTER TWO

### Growing Up Lesbian or Bisexual Before 1965

Growing up lesbian or bisexual before the advent of second-wave feminism, gay rights, and the lesbian movement was sometimes akin to living in a vacuum. There existed very little publicly available information about same-sex relationships, and most women remained completely ignorant of their existence. Many were aware of the social condemnation of male homosexuality, but since female homosexuality and bisexuality featured less frequently in media coverage and social discourse, most girls and young women were unaware of the possibility of relationships with other females. They were trained in the norms and expectations of heterosexual matrimony, and bonds with other girls were an important part of their lives but were not supposed to replace the primary bond a girl was eventually to form with a man.

Even in this context of silence, some young women managed to arrive at a lesbian or bisexual subjectivity. Their experiences may be categorized in several ways. A significant number of young women who formed relationships with other women thought, because they had no access to information about others like themselves, that they were unique and that no-one else shared their experience. Many of these women lived for years in a single same-sex relationship before discovering the existence of lesbian community. Others were lucky enough to have found out about the existence of lesbian relationships early in their lives, and they were able to conceive of their sexuality as something shared with others. These women found lesbian communities rather more quickly, and labelled their sexuality more readily within the available terminology; they had a framework within which to explain their desires and experiences. Still other women, while their desires and actions did not fit neatly into heteronormativity, did not develop non-heterosexual subjectivities until later in life. These women married and had children before coming out as lesbians.

This chapter examines the childhoods, adolescent years, and young adulthoods of many of the women whose histories are the focus of this study.<sup>224</sup> The first section deals with those women whose written records I examine, and from whom we have no childhood records or memories. While one can only speculate about or infer from the later records the norms with which their parents raised them, whether or not their childhoods were happy ones, and whether or not they experienced same-sex attractions as children, I do suggest the norms with which they were most likely raised.

The second section of this chapter discusses exclusively the women interviewed for this study. In particular, I examine their backgrounds and the values with which they were raised, focusing particularly on heteronormativity. In every case, the women interviewed were well aware, as were most women of their generation, that it was expected that they would marry and have children. It was not necessarily the case that they were told so explicitly; often, heterosexual norms were established by inference or by the absence of visible and viable alternatives. Thirteen of the narrators did marry and have children. In several of those cases, a lesbian identity was not explored until the death of or divorce from the husband. The narrators' stories illustrate the strength of normative gender roles in the years before second-wave feminism, but they also show that many women were able to view those norms very selectively or even to reject them outright in favour of a lifestyle abhorrent to society at large.

Finally, I examine the transcripts of the Lesbians Making History Project (LMH) interviews. These interviews, conducted in the 1980s and early 1990s with women who were involved in the lesbian community in Ontario in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, focus primarily on community relationships, the bar scene, and politics. Providing rather less material on childhood than do my own interviews, the LMH interviews nevertheless allow glimpses of

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<sup>224</sup> Not all the narrators' lives are examined here, since not all were able to remember or were forthcoming with details about their childhoods. The letters from "Bunny" Norcrop to Elisabeth Govan, which are examined later, are not discussed in this chapter, as no information is available about their childhoods.

family relationships based on parents' expectations for their daughters and reactions to those daughters' wayward desires and actions.

This chapter traces some of the basic features of many of the narrators' early lives. The experiences discussed do not necessarily inform lesbian or bisexual subjectivities, but rather formed the broader contexts of the women's lives. In the subsequent sections on gender performance and on homosexuality I link the narrators' childhood experiences and their construction of subjectivities. What is clear from this basic biographical information is that—as we in the present day know, but ideologues of the postwar era in particular did not—there was no relation between the relative degrees of these women's happiness as children and their sexuality. Postwar experts were inclined to lay the blame for homosexuality clearly at the feet of parents, and to suggest that a negative family environment could cause homosexuality. The narrators' stories suggest that that was anything but the case, and in fact may suggest that the more negative family situations led not to the emergence of homosexuality, but rather to its repression until later in life.

While this study does not posit a cause of the narrators' sexualities, it suggests that larger clues about the formation of non-heterosexual subjectivities are to be found elsewhere in these women's lives, in their relationship to heteronormativity, in their awareness of homosexuality when they were young, and in their acknowledgements and explorations of early same-sex desires. I am not suggesting, however, that these women possessed an essential, innate sexual orientation which simply awaited discovery. Rather, I argue that their life narratives imply an innate sexual orientation precisely because essentialist arguments have been both the dominant mode of explanation of sexuality for at least the last hundred years and a necessary tool for self-understanding in relation to that discourse and for campaigning for legal and social recognition.

**Love Letters and Journals: The Records of Early Twentieth-Century Lesbian and Bisexual Women**

Several of the women whose lives are the subject of this study have left only written records of their experiences, in the form of love letters, other correspondence, and journals. It is not possible to glean from these sources the details of their childhoods and adolescent years. Nor is it possible to determine the degree to which any specific childhood experiences contributed to a later lesbian or bisexual subjectivity. These records do, however, show that the women concerned, all of whom were well-educated and middle-class, had acquired the values expected of women of their class and age yet experienced, in their later teens and in their adult years, feelings of attraction towards other women clearly at odds with heteronormative standards. In this chapter, I provide a summary of the views of each as revealed in their written records and via other sources, and I infer from those sources the norms with which these women most likely were raised.

The collection of letters between Frieda Fraser and Edith “Bud” Bickerton Williams is the largest thus far in Canadian lesbian history. It is also a rare and unusual collection in its expressiveness and detail about a passionate relationship between two women.<sup>225</sup> Their relationship embodies a twentieth-century version of the middle-class romantic friendship, yet with a clearly physical element. It also reveals the emotional hardships women had to endure in order to be with one another, and it clearly illustrates the depth of lesbian passion. It is unclear exactly when Frieda and Bud met, but they saw themselves as having been a couple since 1918. Both were born and lived in Toronto. It was during their separation between 1925 and 1927,

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<sup>225</sup> The quality, witty style and engaging subject matter of these letters, and also of the Constance Grey Swartz collection, render them so unusual that they are difficult to work with in some respects. For example, but a small portion of the Fraser-Williams correspondence is cited in this dissertation. The richness of the correspondence means that attempting to make generalizations from it about women’s experience is risky, for these were two unusual women. It also means that other source material can seem rather bland in comparison.

while Frieda continued her medical training in the United States and Bud travelled and worked in Europe, that they began the passionate correspondence left to us today.<sup>226</sup>

Given the paucity of records from their childhoods, it is difficult to determine the values with which Frieda Fraser and Bud Williams were raised. It can reasonably be assumed, however, that they were influenced by many of the contradictory norms of the early twentieth century. While the ideal and the expected role for all women was marriage and motherhood, it was now rather more customary than it had been just a decade or two earlier for women of Frieda's and Bud's class to work before marriage. As Veronica Strong-Boag reveals, by the beginning of the interwar period in Canada many areas of the workforce were opening up for women. Working-class women had long been in paid employment, but a new trend in the 1920s was for a larger number of middle-class women to enter the paid workforce before marriage than had done so in the previous century. No longer was there quite as much stigma attached to the middle-class woman who worked for money, although it should be noted that her employment was to be in respectable and appropriately feminine areas of the workforce, such as in teaching, nursing, or good quality clerical work.<sup>227</sup>

Frieda and Bud did not encounter family opposition to their working for a living. Frieda may have been privileged in this regard, since she came from a family in which higher education was already valued, her father and one of her brothers also being academics. While her father was in the humanities at the University of Toronto, Frieda's elder brother Donald, to whom she was very close, was a scientist. His support may have aided in her being able to pursue the career that she adopted, first as a medical doctor and then as a professor of microbiology. Frieda completed her BA in 1922 and then undertook medical training, graduating with her MB in 1925.

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<sup>226</sup> The letters between them, and other papers relating to their relationship and to their personal and working lives, were donated to the University of Toronto Archives by Donald Fraser and Nancy Fraser Brooks, nephew and niece of Frieda, after Frieda's death in 1992.

<sup>227</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled*, 41-2.

In the summer of 1925, she began her internship at the New York Infirmary for Women and Children and then moved to Philadelphia to complete her post-doctoral training in chest diseases. It was during Frieda's time in New York and Philadelphia that the majority of the letters were written.

Very little is known of Bud's family, on the other hand. Bud's father was "in Insurance" and her mother was a housewife.<sup>228</sup> There seems not to have been any opposition to Bud's working in a bank in England. Bud had tried university education but had not enjoyed it. Clerical work in the developing banking system in England was an appropriate employment for a woman of her class and had the added "advantage" of keeping her away from Frieda, something Bud's mother desired greatly. While it is clear that Frieda and Bud rebelled against heteronormativity in their dogged pursuit of a relationship against considerable family pressure, it seems from the records available that their upbringing had not included attempts to keep them away from the world of female employment, and thus they had not had to rebel against family wishes in that regard.

Both women were aware of the norms regarding marriage and sexuality, and were obviously privy to some of the new discussion of the moderate sexual freedoms attributed to the "Roaring Twenties."<sup>229</sup> What is not clear, however, is the degree to which that awareness was acquired when they were growing up, rather than after they left their respective homes and ventured into university and working life. The tone of their letters often suggests the newness of the knowledge and their surprise at some of the views they encountered among others. There is

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<sup>228</sup> Nancy Fraser Brooks to Karen Duder, email, 23 November 1999.

<sup>229</sup> Historians have questioned the degree to which the 1920s really constituted a period of new sexual freedoms, given the strength of existing norms and the class specificity of sexual experimentation. Nevertheless, it may be said that for the social class of which Bud and Frieda were a part, there was a new mood of sexual adventure and a new acknowledgement of women's sexual pleasure that had not graced the century before.

not, however, any tone of moral outrage that would suggest that they were reacting to attitudes which fundamentally challenged their longest and most deeply-held beliefs.

Birth control was a topic of considerable interest in the 1920s and 1930s, and one that inspired a great deal of debate among women and men of Frieda's and Bud's social class, as well as considerable interest among the populace as a whole. The immense popularity of Marie Stopes' *Married Love*, which gave advice on how to achieve sexual pleasure in marriage, and her *Wise Parenthood*, showed that many in society were keen to break through "the dam of reticence" which had governed discussion of sexuality before their publication in 1918.<sup>230</sup> In Canada, the topic of birth control received wide attention particularly after the visit to Vancouver of the American activist Margaret Sanger in 1923. Stopes and Sanger would prove to be valuable resources to Canadians wishing to improve marital pleasure and limit family size.<sup>231</sup>

Correspondence between Frieda and Bud during the years in which the debate was beginning to warm up clearly indicates that they both held values that placed them more on the side of birth control, although they simultaneously displayed considerable ignorance about and even negative opinions of pre-marital sex. Frieda wrote to Bud in 1924:

There was a swell discussion at a staff meeting here about birth-control. Did I tell you? I felt awfully ignorant. I don't seem to know the first thing about what every—I was going to say woman in the street but realised that it isn't the homologue of man in the street which is what I wanted. Dr. Baldwin the president of course takes the ancient view that every child is the blessing of God etc. etc. up to 70 x 7 but there are others almost as old who didn't share her views & altogether it was most entertaining. Of course we discussed it afterwards among ourselves. It was then that I felt young & innocent. The young women in this country I think might run your British youth a fairly close race if what you call speed includes that—I have never known exactly what is meant by fast—except from people who mean "my dear she smokes!" And I

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<sup>230</sup> Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995), 208-209. *Married Love* sold 17,000 copies in its first year alone, and went through five editions. *Wise Parenthood* was also extremely popular.

<sup>231</sup> Angus McLaren and Arlene Tigar McLaren, *The Bedroom and the State*, 55-59.

take it that that is an archaic use of the word. One of Ada's friends, a medical man, says that every woman ought to be able to have a baby by the time she's thirty & no damn' questions asked. Isn't that nice?...I think [the] business of parking babies in homes is poisonous. From what I have seen though I must say that the babies with "no fathers" are much the nicest handsomest & best cared for that I have seen. I don't know what the moral of that is.<sup>232</sup>

Frieda asked Bud about the state of birth control in England. "Are there any contraceptive clinics or have they been shut up?" she inquired. In the United States, during her internship at the New York Infirmary for Women and Children, information was difficult to come by, which Frieda thought was "probably due to the anomalous state of the law and public opinion." Most of Frieda's clients had "only one complaint against fate & that is too many children. It seems dreadfully unfair. Levi [another doctor at the infirmary] remarked one day that all the information about contraception she had ever got was from laymen & she has been practicing about 30 years. I think almost anyone would say the same."<sup>233</sup> So new in public discourse and so scandalous was the subject of contraception that even doctors lacked information.

Bud seemed to place physical sexuality very much within the rubric of heterosexual marriage. In a letter written after her arrival in England, she remembered an occasion when she had had cause to talk to a friend the previous year about sex:

It was at House party last year on the last night of the second week-end that I found O'Reilly sitting about gloomily outside the sleeping-quarters. I joined her with nips and we sat on the steps going down to the road and were fallen over by the entire house-party for the first hour—but after that we got down to conversation and I gathered that O'R. wanted to be a nun. I said "What nonsense" of course and she said that there didn't seem to be anything else to do. I suggested that she might get married, a great many people did and liked it, etc.

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<sup>232</sup> University of Toronto Archives (UTA), Fraser Family Personal Records, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 05, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 5 December 1924. Available information suggests that this would have taken place during Frieda's training at the University of Toronto.

<sup>233</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 07, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 19 February 1926.

and it seemed to be the best thing to do if you were just an ordinary person like most of us. She said flatly that she would never get married and I inquired why. Her reason was that the whole thing was horrible; and then burst out that she hadn't known anything about it, and it had never occurred to her to ask anyone, until the year before at school when she had made some remarks during a discussion about one of the girls being married which had shown her ignorance. The other girls were apparently much amused and had enlightened her. She was simply disgusted and made up her mind then and there that she would become a nun.<sup>234</sup>

O'Reilly's antipathy towards marriage and sexuality was further revealed when she said to Bud "“You know, Bud, I'm not a bit affectionate and I hate touching people—and I would never like being married.”” Bud remembered that, earlier that day, she and O'Reilly had been discussing the showing of affection. She remarked,

I had been chatting to her about the way we lay about in heaps and were rather affectionate [and] she had been a bit astonished at the way everyone fell on each other's necks...and she had said that she had always despised people who did it before and couldn't bear it herself until she came to Bolton, and then she had rather liked it. That it was nice when you or McEvoy or I put our arms around her and said such affectionate things to her, and she supposed that it was because she liked us.<sup>235</sup>

That Bud might have conceptualised her relationship with Frieda as something a little less than or different from marriage is indicated by Bud's response to O'Reilly's opinions. Bud told Frieda:

I reminded her of that and added that you didn't marry anyone unless you liked them a great deal more than that and that then it was all right. She asked me if I didn't think the whole business of sex was simply revolting and I said that I did not, and that if I ever saw anyone I liked sufficiently, I would marry them and be thrilled to death about it, all of [which] seemed to astonish her greatly.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 19 August 1925.

<sup>235</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 19 August 1925.

<sup>236</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 19 August 1925.

Here it seems as if Bud considered sex in relation only to people whom she could have married, yet such a perspective does not seem to fit with the rather suggestive letters I will discuss in Chapter Three. Many of the letters between Bud and Frieda clearly imply a physically sexual relationship of some description. It may be, however, that Bud had gained the perception, through her childhood and adolescent learning and then in conversations with other young women, that “sex” was really “intercourse”, and that physical desire and activity between women was not the same thing as “sex.”<sup>237</sup> Her not addressing her relationship with Frieda in terms of marriage, despite their already having been a couple for seven years, does not mean that she did not think of it as permanent.

It would appear that O’Reilly had had the misfortune, as was common in the early twentieth century, of having been ill-informed about sexuality, making its discovery rather shocking. Bud told Frieda that “She also asked me when and how I had found out about it, and I told her. She said that she had never talked to Mrs. O’R. about anything and she had not even told her about the Lord afflicting her [one assumes that Bud means menstruation], and that had been a bit of a shock too.”<sup>238</sup> From Bud’s tone and wording, one can reasonably assume that her own mother had explained menstruation to her. What is not clear is at what age Bud had found out about sex, although the above quotation does suggest that it was her mother who had told her.

Bud was made aware very shortly after her arrival in England in 1925 that she was rather naive about the sexual goings-on of young women. “I’m amused at your feeling young and innocent during a discussion on birth-control,” she wrote to Frieda in New York,

but it is nothing to what I feel here. Peg and I had a heart-to-heart talk the other day about our generation here, and I was much enlightened. I have thought they

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<sup>237</sup> This issue is explored in much greater depth in Chapter Three.

<sup>238</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 19 August 1925.

were all rather gay and fast all summer, but put it down to my low mind and the fact that I always like to think the worst of anyone; but after what Peg said, I am feeling very pure and childish. It is most astonishing, Frieda. I thought that all these books about young women who hop off with men for week-ends were exaggerated, or about very isolated cases, but they're not. She says that she is dull and stupid and not a social success because she doesn't, and that it is taken for granted that any girl of more than 22 or so has lovers.<sup>239</sup>

Bud had attended a luncheon in Birmingham “which was composed entirely of unmarried women of between 25 and 30.” The women had been discussing birth control and Bud admitted that she knew nothing at all about Marie Stopes' books on the subject, at which they advised her that perhaps she should read them. When Bud said “I didn't see why I should as I was not thinking of getting married at the moment and the subject didn't interest me greatly,” the women were “awfully amused and said that I should perhaps find such knowledge useful anyway. I was so astonished that my jaw nearly dropped. I had suspected that the girl who said it was living with a man but I didn't expect it to be talked of quite so openly.”<sup>240</sup> She asked Frieda if she thought that she was “feeble-minded” about it. Bud's opinion was that it was acceptable for a woman and a man to have intercourse before marriage if their relationship were a permanent one, but the practice of “going off” with a different person each weekend was “horrible” to her.

Bud's reactions to the opinions she heard expressed in England indicate that she embodied many of the contradictions typical of the early twentieth century. Whether she was raised with the values she came to express, or instead developed them in reaction against those of her family, is unknown. By the early 1920s, however, by which time she was passing into young adulthood—emerging twentieth-century discourse would have described her as a youth until approximately the age of twenty-five—Bud's attitudes reflected changing sexual mores, yet

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<sup>239</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 17 December 1925.

<sup>240</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 17 December 1925.

there remained a clear boundary between acceptable and unacceptable sexual behaviour. Bud, akin to some of the women described in Karen Dubinsky's *Improper Advances*, held that pre-marital sex was allowable only if marriage was foreseen.<sup>241</sup> Without such an expectation, it was unacceptable. This represented a slight shift in the attitudes of women of Bud's class, who previously would have held a very dim view of pre-marital sex under any circumstances.

Constance Grey (whose nickname throughout much of her life was "Conti," although she was also called "Birdie") and her sister Evelyn ("Evie"), although coming from a middle-class family, did not have a traditional middle-class upbringing. The Greys were not wealthy, although they had enough to own their own home, having built a house on Samuel Island, a small island between Mayne and Pender Islands on the coast of British Columbia, which Ralph Grey had purchased before their marriage.<sup>242</sup> Conti's early years were spent on Samuel Island, where her father cleared and worked the land, and tended his flock of sheep. Her mother looked after Conti and her sister, helping with some of the outdoor work in the summer when Ralph's Japanese assistants were away working the salmon run.<sup>243</sup>

The Greys, in addition to owning sheep, raised cattle, pigs and chickens. They grew their own vegetables, and Ralph made the butter and cream and Winifred the family's bread. They were largely self-sufficient. They did often, however, have domestic help. The children's early years were spent around the home and farm and at the beach. In 1910, the family moved to Esquimalt, having invested in a new lot and built a ten-room house there. They had failed to sell Samuel Island whole, and instead were selling the land in subdivisions.

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<sup>241</sup> Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances*.

<sup>242</sup> Marie Elliott, ed., *Winifred Grey: A Gentlewoman's Remembrances of Life in England and the Gulf Islands of British Columbia 1871-1910* (Victoria: Gulf Islands Press, 1995), 153.

<sup>243</sup> Elliott, *Winifred Grey*, 169.

From the fall of 1910 on, Conti and her sister were educated at St. Margaret's School in Victoria. Constance later spent two years at finishing school in England, and completed her education in France. In addition, she attended a commercial course at Victoria High.<sup>244</sup> Apart from her commercial subjects, Constance took subjects regarded as appropriate to a young woman of her class, such as history, French and German. The existence of a physiology notebook for 1923 illustrates her interests in science as well as the arts.<sup>245</sup>

None of the available source material tells us the values with which Conti was raised. One would expect her to have been raised with values appropriate to a young middle-class woman, yet her father's socialist leanings and the family's early years clearing the land on Samuel Island made her upbringing a little different to that of most of her peers in the small city of Victoria at the turn of the century. That her parents, despite their financial constraints after building their new home, saw fit to send Conti and Evie to St. Margaret's school, however, does indicate that they sought for their daughters an appropriate middle-class education. Further, their later reactions to problems in Conti's marriage indicate that the Greys and their relatives regarded womanly loyalty and domesticity as crucial components of married life. It is therefore likely that Conti was raised with the usual norms regarding marriage and sexuality, even if she later came to rebel against them.

Charlotte Whitton's childhood has been examined by Patricia Rooke and R.L. Schnell, who suggest that Charlotte had a happy childhood, apart from divisions within the family on religious grounds. Charlotte was raised to be both a monarchist and a Canadian patriot. As a child, she was apparently somewhat of a tomboy, preferring the blacksmith's or the livery stable to traditional girl's play.<sup>246</sup> Rooke and Schnell reveal that Charlotte began to succeed early at

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<sup>244</sup>Swartz, Box 12, File 2, Resumé, n.d.

<sup>245</sup>Swartz, Box 1, File 1.

school, “and with such rewards she appears to have begun early to embrace views of innate merit and virtue, where the world fostered the talented and hard-working, and where the self-made man or woman could attain anything desired.”<sup>247</sup> Such an attitude was, of course, largely informed by class, and its expression in later life would reveal Whitton to be someone disinclined to recognize the importance of social factors such as poverty in the lives of those less fortunate than she. It was also an attitude, however, that informed her later relationship with her long-term partner Margaret Grier, as Charlotte valued above all else Margaret’s worth as a person.

From Whitton’s later work in the field of social welfare we can infer the gendered values with which she was raised. Although Whitton herself was never to marry or have children, she nevertheless embodied many of the traditional attitudes of her day. She certainly believed that motherhood was ideally to take place within marriage. Throughout her working life, Charlotte Whitton was often to equate unmarried motherhood with “feeble-mindedness.”<sup>248</sup> While she was one of the few voices in the early twentieth century castigating Canadian society for failing to make responsible the fathers of “illegitimate” children, Charlotte was “convinced that unwed mothers were usually of low intelligence and weak morality....”<sup>249</sup>

Rooke and Schnell argue that Whitton was essentially celibate, and suggest that her attitudes towards unwed mothers reflect the view that “all women without recourse to licit sexual expression be as strong-willed as she; they must demonstrate the same discipline and self-control.”<sup>250</sup> While I disagree that Charlotte Whitton was as celibate as she has been

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<sup>246</sup> P.T. Rooke and R.L. Schnell, *No Bleeding Heart: Charlotte Whitton, A Feminist On the Right* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1987), 7-8.

<sup>247</sup> Rooke and Schnell, *No Bleeding Heart*, 8.

<sup>248</sup> Rooke and Schnell, *No Bleeding Heart*, 22-23.

<sup>249</sup> Rooke and Schnell, *No Bleeding Heart*, 25.

portrayed,<sup>251</sup> it is certainly reasonable to suggest that Whitton thought that heterosexual intercourse ought properly to be expressed only in matrimony. It is very likely that this was one of the main values with which she was raised, coming as she did from a family whose early religious practice was Anglican but whose original denominations were Methodist and Roman Catholic.

Religion was very important to the Whitton family, and it is likely that she received thorough instruction in the dominant Christian precepts regarding sexuality and marriage. She would have known, for example, that she was supposed eventually to wed, and that she was expected to remain a virgin until marriage and not stray sexually during marriage. She would have known that sexual intercourse before marriage was regarded as sinful and, depending on the particular attitudes of her family and her church, may have thought that any form of sexual activity before marriage was sinful. Obedience to men—father and then husband—would most likely have been emphasized, and Whitton might well have been presented with some very negative biblical and other examples of women who were neither appropriate in their sexuality nor appropriately obedient.

**“Not liking to be a heterosexual person, but not really knowing what else to be”: growing up under heteronormativity.**

Whereas for the first decades of the twentieth century and earlier the historian of sexuality must rely on written records, in a study of more recent decades oral interviews can be conducted which augment the available written records and provide the historian with the opportunity to question historical “subjects” about very intimate parts of their histories. The minimum age of narrators for this study was deliberately set at fifty-five so as to ensure that the

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<sup>250</sup> Rooke and Schnell, *No Bleeding Heart*, 25-26.

<sup>251</sup> The physical elements of her relationship with Grier are discussed in Chapter Three.

narrators would have reached at least young adulthood before 1965, and consequently that they would be able to discuss the norms of the period under study with which they were raised as children. Interviewing women who later identified as lesbian but who had not, for the most part, heard of lesbianism while growing up allows us to examine the linguistic constraints involved in the development of sexual subjectivities and also allows us to identify any crucial moments in their childhood and adolescent subjectivities which may later have informed their lesbian ones.

This section examines the testimonies of the twenty-five women interviewed for this study, focusing particularly on their early years. Their dates of birth range from 1913 to 1948, and in their childhoods and adult years they were to witness many of the most significant events of the twentieth century. From the First World War to the advent of second-wave feminism and gay and lesbian rights, these women have experienced considerable change throughout their lives. Most important for many of them was the development of their attraction towards women which, in most cases, eventually resulted in the adoption of a gay or lesbian identity label. The timing of their same-sex attractions varied considerably, twelve of the women having their first same-sex experience while still children, and the remainder not exploring same-sex sexuality until adulthood. Despite the differences among them, however, all were raised with heterosexual norms and had, each in her own way, to negotiate the tricky terrain of dating, attraction, sex and relationships.

In this section, I examine the narrators' childhoods, adolescent years, and young adulthoods in relation to their inculcation into dominant norms of sexuality in the period 1910-1965. I pay particular attention to the amount and nature of the information they received about their journeys to womanhood, the prevailing societal expectations of heterosexuality, and the existence and nature of homosexuality. I then discuss those women who experienced attractions towards other girls and women when they were growing up, and those who explored those feelings physically. I also examine the nature of their heterosexual experiences, if any, and finally I discuss the ways in which childhood experiences were or were not formative of a later

lesbian or bisexual subjectivity. Not all narrators could remember or were forthcoming about their childhoods. This section discusses those narrators who did discuss their childhoods and adolescent years, some of them being more expansive about them and remembering them in much clearer detail than others.

The narrators come from a variety of backgrounds, from very poor working-class families to moderately wealthy middle-class ones. They are overwhelmingly Protestant, with only two narrators, Reva and Louise, being Jewish, and one, Chris, being Catholic. Betty was Anglican but was sent to a Catholic school. The narrators' testimonies show that their childhoods and adolescences were variously happy and unhappy. No consistent theme of alienation from family is revealed, and nor does any particular gender performance appear to have predominated in their childhoods. Many of the narrators remember their childhoods very positively. Even though there might be the tendency for them to construct their childhood memories in a positive light from the perspective of the present day, I think it reasonable to suggest that many of the narrators did not experience their childhoods as especially traumatic.

The narrators for this study shared the experience of growing up in an era in which it was still expected that all young women would eventually marry. That message was conveyed to them both overtly and covertly. Many cannot remember specifically being told that that was what was expected of them, but do remember that they were aware of the expectation as they moved towards adulthood. Such a powerful norm was often expressed in such terms as "that's just the way it was" or "that's just what you did." It was not the case that these women were physically forced in any particular direction, but rather that they were made well aware of the roles they were expected to fill as girls and then as women, and that alternatives were either not presented to them or were presented negatively.

The narrators may be divided into two broad groups: those who had same-sex experiences as children or teenagers and those who did not. But it is not the case that all those who did have same-sex experiences before adulthood embraced lesbian or bisexual subjectivities

immediately. Barb, Pat, Mary, Cheryl, and Pam have always had sexual relationships only with women. Louise experimented sexually with girls when young, had one or two encounters with men as a young adult, followed by another same-sex experience, and has not had sexual experiences at all since. Jill, Veronica, Maureen, Magda and Jane all left their childhood experiences with girls behind and married, only later to return to lesbian subjectivities. Of the narrators who did not have same-sex experiences until they were adults, Sandra, Chris and Lois were the only ones to have been exclusively lesbian. The remaining narrators led heterosexual lives before exploring same-sex attractions.

### **The Women**

In the mid-twentieth century, it was argued that homosexuality was the result of dysfunction in the family. Psychologists in particular posited that parenting was responsible both for those children and adolescents who manifested appropriate gender and sexual behaviour and for those who did not. At the turn of the twenty-first century, it is generally believed that parenting can indeed affect a child's later behaviours, such as in the case of domestic violence or sexual abuse. It is not generally believed, however, that parenting is causative of sexual orientation. In this section, I briefly outline the childhoods of those narrators who remembered them, and I arrange them in relation to childhoods described as largely happy and childhoods which contained restrictive or violent parenting remembered by the narrator. Not only do these brief accounts support the modern interpretation that degree of happiness and appropriateness of parental role models do not affect sexual subjectivity, they also illustrate the fact that the narrators' childhoods and adolescences were, in many respects, similar to or the same as those of people who would later identify as heterosexual.

Sarah, who was born in 1913, remembers her childhood as a happy one. The daughter of a naval officer, she was a middle-class child. When her family settled in Esquimalt, her father bought a large house in a neighbourhood of relatively small houses. Neither of Sarah's parents

were strict, but both raised the children with the manners appropriate to their social class. Sarah describes the primary values she was raised with as “the good old ‘do unto others as you would be done by’ and, I think, an open mind more than anything else.” Despite their social class the family did not have a great deal of money, as there was no pension plan for the navy. When Sarah’s father died of pneumonia in 1925, Sarah’s mother was left to raise the four children alone. She did not remarry until the children were young adults. Although her family was not wealthy, their social status and expectations clearly placed them in the realm of Euro-Canadian middle-class life. Sarah left for Toronto when she was eighteen and stayed in a boarding-house, the Sherbourne Club, with a friend. It was not thought at all unusual that she should go out to work, and as her mother knew people in Toronto who could provide an initial contact for Sarah, she was allowed to leave home unaccompanied and join the ranks of working girls in the city.

Anne, an American born in 1924 who immigrated to Canada in 1965, remembers that she had “a very good bringing up” by her mother. She liked her father, but “insurance, and golf, and cards, that was his life.”<sup>252</sup> Her mother, a dancer, was a housewife after marriage but also volunteered extensively. The youngest and the only girl in a family of three, Anne was a tomboy who played with her next nearest brother and his friends. Her friends were all middle-class children, and her neighbourhood was not racially diverse. Anne’s memories of her childhood are much less clear than those of some other narrators, but more importantly are less clear than her memories of her young adulthood at university, which may be interpreted as suggesting that it is her later experiences which form more crucial elements in her subjectivity. She does remember, however, that she became sexually active as a teenager.

Betty, who was born in England in 1928, also remembers her childhood as a happy one. She enjoyed sports, was an artist, and learned the violin. After leaving school because it was not at that time possible for her to go to university, Betty worked in an office job. When her parents

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<sup>252</sup> Anne, personal interview, 1 May 1998.

died, Betty had come under the care of her strict grandmother: “I had a grandmother who...supposedly raised me the rest of the way after my parents had been killed.” The word “supposedly” refers both to the distant and cold nature of her grandmother’s care of her and to the difficulty of their relationship. Betty fled as soon as she was able and went to London to find work.

Magda describes her childhood as very enjoyable, even though she was aware at the time that her family was poor. Her father was of the opinion in the 1930s that “women did not need to be educated as they would go and get married anyway,” and Magda and all of her older sisters left school at sixteen, as did her brothers.<sup>253</sup> Only Magda’s two younger sisters continued their education, because their father had, by that time, changed his mind about education for girls. Respectability was important to Magda’s parents, although that did not mean that the children were particularly restricted in their activities. For example, the girls were allowed to wear makeup as long as they “looked respectable.”<sup>254</sup>

Cheryl was born in 1941 on Bell Island, Newfoundland. She was the youngest of four children. Cheryl’s mother died shortly after she was born, and Cheryl’s grandmother looked after the children until the family immigrated to Canada (as Newfoundland was not yet part of Canada) when Cheryl was five. Her father remarried and Cheryl acquired another sister and two brothers. Cheryl remembers that her childhood was a happy one, even though her father, a coal miner and steel worker, was poor. Neither of her parents had had much education; Cheryl remembers that her father went “down pits” when he was thirteen, and had a grade two education. Her mother, she recalled, was the daughter of “a Labrador Eskimo.”<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Magda, email interview, 10 June 1998.

<sup>254</sup> Magda, email interview, 10 June 1998.

<sup>255</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

As a child, Cheryl played with both siblings and school friends. She remembers in particular liking to play doctors and nurses, and remarked that she always wanted to be the doctor. Cheryl was fifteen when she went to work, and she thinks that her older siblings were even younger. “I was not a teenager,” she comments, “I did not have a teenage life as most people know a teenage life...I didn’t go to all the things that the other girls did...And I got a job as soon as I left school. I got a job first dish washing, then pot washing (I graduated) and then I became a waitress, slingin’ hash, serving cokes, chips & gravy, cherry cokes.”<sup>256</sup> It was at the waitressing job that Cheryl met her first female partner, Robyn, who worked on the soda fountain.<sup>257</sup> In 1959, at the age of eighteen, Cheryl joined the air force.<sup>258</sup>

Some of the narrators came from families in which one or more parent was strict, neglectful or abusive. Jane’s upbringing in the 1930s and 1940s was exceptionally strict, and all the children lived in fear of their father. Alcohol was forbidden in the home, mainly because Jane’s mother had had an alcoholic brother who eventually committed suicide. She was raised with the traditional values of honesty and hard work, but her father was also prone to indoctrinate the children in anti-Catholic prejudice, something with which Jane says she disagreed even as a child. She spent a great deal of time playing outdoors with a friend from the street.<sup>259</sup>

Louise, who was born in 1927, and her brother were brought up by maids, because her father was often away playing with his orchestra, and her mother had started working to make ends meet in the Depression. Louise remembers her English childhood as an isolated one. She was successful at school, but was a loner, spending most of her time reading. Because she did

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<sup>256</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

<sup>257</sup> The abusive relationship between Cheryl and Ruth is discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>258</sup> Cheryl’s experiences in the air force are discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>259</sup> Jane, personal interview, 1 October 1998.

not have the kind of home life that her schoolfriends did—where “mother stays home and makes cookies, and Dad goes out to work, and blah blah blah”—Louise found the idea of “proper” parents and home lives very attractive. Louise now thinks that she simply did what she wanted to do as a child.

Despite the fact that her parents had an unusual relationship, and her mother was openly having an affair while still married, there was pressure on Louise to get married and have children. “It was always my mother’s dream,” remembers Louise, who was introduced quite deliberately to all her mother’s friends’ sons. Louise preferred to go out to dances. She was under a curfew and was not allowed to drink or smoke, but Louise managed nonetheless to begin visiting dances and Soho clubs when she was a teenager in the 1940s. “As long as I could support myself by having my elbow on the corner of the dresser, the tallboy, and talk to her before I went to bed, you know, that was cool. She didn’t know how drunk I was.”<sup>260</sup>

Because Louise remembers so little of her childhood, it is difficult to assess the ways in which she was inculcated into heterosexuality. Certainly, her childhood did not fit the ideals promoted in the 1930s and 1940s. Despite their relative wealth, her mother was employed after marriage, even running her own business. While a father’s absence during childhood was not uncommon, her father’s occupation made him somewhat less respectable than he might have been in a more traditional job. That Louise’s mother had an affair during her marriage, but more particularly that her children knew of it, was unusual for the time. Louise did not, therefore, as a young woman have what would be, in the eyes of dominant society, acceptable role-models. She was given considerable freedom in her social life, a freedom that brought many pleasures, but also many perils.

Sandra was born in New Westminster, British Columbia, in 1931. Sandra’s family was poor, and they lived in very cramped, rented accommodation. The six children were punished

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<sup>260</sup> Louise, personal interview, 10 November 1998.

physically if they were disobedient. Her father in particular “was not a cruel man,” but did dish out a beating “when it was deserved.” Sandra remembers her brother receiving a couple of beatings from their mother with a curtain rod.<sup>261</sup> Sandra enjoyed her school years, however, and does not think that her childhood was a bad one.

Because she was raised in a rural area near Kingston, Ontario, Katie went to school with and played with the children of neighbouring farming families. Like many of the narrators, she played with both girls and boys when she was young. Her parents were strict, but not unreasonably so. She does, however, remember being a fearful child, particularly of her mother’s disapproval. The children were raised to care about society, and to be honest, loyal, and community-minded. Katie grew up in the 1940s with the sense of having to do “what was right” but not knowing exactly what she was supposed to do. Katie trained as a nurse at the age of nineteen. Her parents approved of her going into nursing, particularly as several of her aunts were trained nurses. Unlike most of the parents in the neighbourhood, Katherine’s parents did not assume that their daughter would get married right after school. Katie did later marry, however.

Veronica was born in Ontario in 1940 and was raised in Toronto and East York. Her father, who was from Toronto, was a steam fitter, coppersmith and plumber. Her mother, a factory worker, had immigrated to Canada from England at the age of sixteen. Veronica does not recall any particular values with which she was raised, but comments that her parents were “basically good people.”<sup>262</sup> Veronica revealed that her childhood was not as happy as it might have been. Her father was a gambler, and often stayed out all night gambling and drinking. She remembers him vomiting in the bathroom afterwards, and recalls that there was often screaming in the house because of his behaviour. Veronica did not find out until she was thirty that her

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<sup>261</sup> Sandra, personal interview, 25 May 1998.

<sup>262</sup> Veronica, personal interview, 27 September 1998.

father had been married previously. Veronica describes herself as a loner as a child, yet she played sports and played with boys.

Jill also remembers that her childhood was not a particularly happy one. Jill is the youngest of the narrators, born in England in 1948. After her family moved to Canada in 1952, when Jill was four years old, they lived in White Rock and then in North Vancouver. Jill comments that she was an unwanted child and thought of her mother as “the iron woman.” Her father was quiet until he started drinking, when he became violent towards Jill’s brother and mother. Her mother’s aggression was taken out on Jill, and Jill’s brother was also violent. Jill remembers her childhood as fearful, and portrays herself as being stuck between her two parents. In this climate of fear, Jill withdrew from family life: “my happiness and safety came because we did live in North Vancouver, and because it was a wooded area, and I would leave the home very early in the morning and I would go out and lie down in the bush, meditate or pray. This was safety for me, and I never came home until it was quite dark at night.”<sup>263</sup>

Jerry, who was born in England in 1945, was the daughter of an air force couple.<sup>264</sup> Jerry and her parents immigrated to Ottawa in 1947 and then moved to Toronto when Jerry was fourteen. Her father was an alcoholic who was not involved with the childrearing but had a clear preference for Jerry’s younger sister. She recalled the problems with her father beginning at least as early as when she was nine, when she got into “a fist fight” with him because she wanted to live with her aunt. She stayed with friends of the family from age nine to fourteen. There she became more involved in the Anglican church, eventually teaching Sunday School. At the age

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<sup>263</sup> Jill, personal interview, 30 May 1998.

<sup>264</sup> Jerry, personal interview conducted by Elise Chenier, Lesbians Making History project (LMH), 23 November 1992. Both of Jerry’s parents were in the air force, her mother having joined the women’s division. The pseudonym “Jerry” is that chosen by Chenier in her use of this interview in Elise Chenier, “Tough Ladies and Troublemakers.”

of fifteen, after the family had moved to Toronto, Jerry left home and found a job with a credit company.

Many of the women just discussed led very average lives as children. Although one or two had unusual parents whose personal lives might have offered more information on sexuality than usual in society, most had very ordinary parents who raised them with the values and norms appropriate for the time. Some were happy children; some were not. There is therefore no common denominator, either among those who did have early same-sex experiences or among those who did not, which would account for their sexualities. From a late twentieth/early twenty-first century perspective, this is hardly surprising, because we now know that sexual orientation crosses all class boundaries and is no respecter of religious affiliation, political persuasion, or family structure. Those who decried homosexuality in the period under study, though, would have found the “cause” of these women’s lesbianism or bisexuality in their families; they would have suggested either that it was an inherited characteristic or that it was the product of dysfunctional family.

### **The Journey Towards Womanhood**

For all young Canadian women, the journey to womanhood was one of heavy indoctrination, confusion, and experimentation with gendered behaviour. For many, it was also a journey through ignorance, for little information was available which might have aided young women in their understanding of the expectations they were supposed to fulfil, the feelings they were having, and the bodily changes they underwent as they moved through adolescence. For those of the narrators who were not Canadian, but who were born in other parts of the old Empire or the United States and would later immigrate to Canada, growing up was similar. The expectation was that they would marry and bear children; they received little information, if any,

about their bodies and about sex; and they received little or no information about alternatives to heterosexual matrimony, or those alternatives were presented very negatively.

In this section, I examine the narrators' level of knowledge about sexuality and the body as they were growing up. As will be shown in Chapter Three, many of the narrators embarked on physical relationships with girls or women, and some with men, during their teenage years and their young adulthood. Many of them did so having acquired very little specific information about their bodies, about sexual pleasure, and about sexual orientation. Here, I outline what little information they did have and how they acquired it.

### **Public Discourse, Sex Education, and Morality**

In the early to mid-twentieth century, information and attitudes about sexuality were intimately intertwined with broader social concerns about the fitness of the nation, fears of "race suicide", and concerns about the changing moral fabric of Canadian life. The sex education that these young women received was part of a broader, normalizing education which increasingly regarded youth, and especially youthful sexuality, as both the hope and the scourge of the nation. Youth were a force to be manoeuvred, both overtly and covertly, in the direction of appropriate, heterosexual, matrimonial sexuality.

As the twentieth century moved on, and it became apparent that pre-marital sexuality was occurring among the young, sexuality became increasingly the focus of a myriad of experts, from psychology and other social sciences, whose agenda it was to steer youth towards an appropriate sexuality. Whereas at the beginning of the century most of the sex advice manuals were aimed at married couples, with a view to their improved sexual enjoyment, in the interwar and especially the postwar era advice literature focused increasingly on dating rituals and how to select the "right" boyfriend or girlfriend. In recognition of the interest young people often had in the opposite sex, these new works attempted to frame heterosexual interest in older, more traditional terms. Teenagers in particular were caught between changing norms: on the one hand

the manuals provided more information about courtship than had previous ones, but on the other hand the information was still heteronormative, moral rather than practical, and phrased in obscure and enigmatic terms, making it difficult for young people to understand fully the desires they were experiencing.

Entirely lacking in advice literature were positive images of lesbianism. While there might be moderate acceptance of same-sex adoration as a phase of development in girls, that same acceptance did not extend to physical relationships between girls or women and to the maintenance of same-sex attractions in adult life.<sup>265</sup> Girls growing up with an awareness of their attraction to other girls or to women were faced either with negative portrayals of their sexuality or with an absence of portrayals. Many internalized the stereotypes available; many more, in the absence of recognizable images, had to extrapolate from or adapt heterosexual norms of behaviour and attractiveness.

The main topic of discussion when Sarah was a teenager was boys, but Sarah thought that this was “rather foolish.” One of the main opportunities to meet boys was the local dance. Sarah remembers that dances were held by the school when she was a teenager, and comments that the girls were somewhat prudish about contact with boys. In keeping with the new norms of the twentieth century—Sarah was born in 1913 and was attending school dances in the “Roaring Twenties”—Sarah’s mother did not insist that she be chaperoned to dances, requiring only that Sarah have a ride home or that she pick her up.

Sarah had a boyfriend as a teenager, but comments that it was not a passionate love affair: they did not explore physical sexuality to any great degree. “There were not too many

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<sup>265</sup> Sherrie Inness indicates that, in the interwar period, “schoolgirl crushes, complete with ardent love letters, kissing, hand holding, and bed sharing, were considered normal relationships for high school and college women.” Sherrie A. Inness, *The Lesbian Menace*, 34. Even in the 1950s, suggests Mary Louise Adams, such advice books as *On Becoming A Woman* “constructed a continuum of affectional and sexual ties” beginning with same-sex ones and later developing into opposite-sex relationships. Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 93.

people who popped into the back seat with people,” Sarah remembered. There was, however, considerable pressure to have a boyfriend; it was “a prestige thing.” “You had to have somebody to take you to dances,” she said. She recalls that she did discuss the attributes of men with other young women, but does not recall precisely what was said. The diary she kept as a teenager did not include entries discussing boys or sexuality.

The links between alcohol and sexuality were a major concern of the early twentieth century, and considerable effort was made by moral reformers to prevent the use of alcohol by the young in particular. In the case of Sarah’s social circle, however, class and gendered attitudes towards alcohol consumption operated as a protector. Drinking, while not disallowed in Sarah’s circle, was moderate. “Boys were thought not much of if they got drunk,” she remarked.<sup>266</sup> Her mother was not opposed to alcohol, and Sarah remembers that there was a great deal of drinking in those days. Each individual took a bottle to the dances and hid it under the table, as it was illegal to have it there. It was not illegal to have liquor in private places, however, so young people would rent rooms and invite friends to their room to drink. “The idea of you going up to somebody’s room sounds almost improper, but it was ok, you know, because you weren’t alone. There was a whole group of people...girls and boys.”<sup>267</sup> In Toronto, where she frequented beverage rooms in her early twenties, Sarah acquired a reputation for being able to drink five bottles of beer before she had to go to the bathroom. Neither in Victoria nor in Toronto was Sarah concerned about alcohol impugning her respectability, although she does acknowledge that her first sexual experience probably occurred because she had been drinking.

Perhaps the major factor in these women’s discovery of sexuality was not alcohol, however, but lack of information. Almost all the narrators revealed that they were given little or no information whatsoever about how the human body worked, about sexual desire, and about

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<sup>266</sup> Sarah, personal interview, 5 August 1998.

<sup>267</sup> Sarah, personal interview, 5 August 1998.

physical sexual relationships. Few of them had any sense of how heterosexual intercourse took place. Fewer still had heard of gay or lesbian people, and those who had were certainly not privy to information about the physical aspects of same-sex relationships. Such detailed information, whether about heterosexuality or about homosexuality, was considered dangerous. And although advice literature did begin to discuss the physical practicalities of heterosexual lovemaking, the conveying of those works and that information to young people still fell too often to parents, who were from a generation less forthcoming and less inclined to discuss such things.

It would be easy to assume from the increasing availability of more explicit sex manuals and advice literature, and from the increasing interest in sex education, that as the century progressed so too did public knowledge about and discussion of sexuality. Oral history allows us to test the validity of arguments that suggest that twentieth-century women were more knowledgeable about sexuality than their predecessors. It can certainly be demonstrated that the postwar era saw an increase in the availability of sex education. Social hygienists had begun in the early twentieth century to promulgate sex education as a mean of ensuring the fitness of the race.<sup>268</sup> In 1919, a Sub-Committee on Sex Education was set up as part of the Canadian National Council for Combatting Venereal Disease. Christabelle Sethna argues that the Sub-Committee's task "was to strengthen parents' ability to provide their children with sex instruction in the home" and that it "upheld the notion that the ideal teacher was the parent and the ideal site for sex instruction was the home."<sup>269</sup> After the Second World War, attention was focused on the prevention of venereal disease and on the maintenance of the patriarchal family, which was assumed to be under threat. Sex education incorporated these concerns. What was regarded as sex education was not necessarily about sex, however. Sex education was often

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<sup>268</sup> Angus McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 39.

<sup>269</sup> Christabelle Sethna, "The Facts of Life: The Sex Instruction of Ontario Public School Children, 1900-1950," (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Toronto, 1995), 160-161.

conflated with gender instruction for girls in particular. N. Rae Speirs, Director of Physical Education for Toronto schools, argued in 1947 for the discouragement of antagonism towards the opposite sex; girls and boys “needed to develop desirable attitudes toward each other.”<sup>270</sup> Sex education might better have been defined as “moral and gender education.”

### **Menstruation, Sexual Exploration, and Learning About Bodies**

An analysis of the amount and kind of information about anatomy, reproduction, and menstruation given to the narrators between the 1920s and the 1950s reveals that assumptions about an increase in public knowledge about sex and sexuality are not necessarily correct. One finds just as much ignorance and shame associated with sexual knowledge in the postwar years as in the 1920s. Because the primary site of sex education was the home, the amount of information one received depended entirely on the willingness of parents to provide it, and parents had been raised in decades when the discussion of such things was inappropriate. As the stories told below reveal, many young women reached adulthood with only the vaguest understanding of the workings of the body, of sexual orientation, and of sexual pleasure. Despite the new acknowledgement among medical professionals that women did, in fact, have sexual feelings, few girls and young women were given a framework in which they could understand and experience them.

If a young woman were lucky, she might be told about menstruation. Enigmatic pamphlets were sometimes available with sanitary products. Some women were given the rudiments of sex education; mid-century books on conception and birth were made available to some, but such literature did not discuss the sexual activity that was preliminary to fertilization of the egg by the sperm. Reva reported that, in the 1940s, when she was in grade school, her mother gave her some information:

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<sup>270</sup> Christabelle Sethna, “The Facts of Life,” 253.

She did try to give me sex ed. In fact, I got into much trouble in school over sex ed. She did the routine thing, with the book and the egg and the fallopian tube and the journey, and talked to me about pregnancy. Never explained how the sperm and the egg actually got it together. But, I had a girlfriend who was a year older, and she had a cousin who was even older, and he told us exactly how the sperm and the egg could get together.<sup>271</sup>

When parents or the books they supplied were less than forthcoming, girls such as Reva often relied on peers to provide information.

Pam also knew little about the mechanics of sexuality, but she was made well aware of moral precepts. It was made very clear to Pam that there were consequences to be paid for errant sexual behaviour, although morality tales were focused on heterosexual promiscuity. The late 1930s and the 1940s were “a time when girls had babies and certainly out of wedlock. A lot of them were shipped off to live with an aunt somewhere. That’s all you ever heard, you know. So and so was gone to live with an aunt in Boston or in Halifax.” Pam reported that she “was scared to death...Well, what was constantly told to me [was that] ‘good girls make mistakes, once.’ But there were a few of them that made that same mistake a number of times. A good girl could get away with one, but after that it was a no-no.”<sup>272</sup>

Sarah, who is the oldest of the narrators, received rather more information about the human body than did many others. Her mother talked to her about menstruation and “she also gave me good old Marie Stopes’ book...*Married Love*.” Her mother wanted her “to have all the scientific details,” and Sarah remembered being “quite intrigued.” It was 1926, and she was thirteen. For a girl of Sarah’s age to be given a Stopes book, or indeed any book that explicit, was very unusual in the early twentieth century. Sarah did not talk to her female friends about

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<sup>271</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

<sup>272</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998. For information on attitudes towards unmarried motherhood, see: Andr e L vesque, “Deviants Anonymous: single Mothers at the H pital de la Mis ricorde in Montreal, 1929-1939,” *Historical Papers/Communications Historiques* (Canadian Historical Association), 1984, 168-183; Margaret Little, *‘No Car, No Radio, No Liquor Permit’: The Moral Regulation of Single Mothers in Ontario, 1920-1997* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 68.

anatomy or sexuality, but remembered one friend who “wanted to try some experiments of some kind.” Sarah was “a bit surprised by it all...I didn’t do anything very much...this was when we were quite young...maybe thirteen, fourteen, twelve.”<sup>273</sup> They were having a picnic. Sarah cannot remember precisely what her friend wanted to do, but she does remember that she was not necessarily shocked but rather did not want to do it. It was the “you show me yours and I’ll show you mine sort of routine...Well, I’d always seen lots of bodies, so I wasn’t a bit surprised.” Sarah’s father had made the children have a cold bath every morning, so she had seen many male bodies, and her mother often went around with few clothes on.

A few of the narrators were lucky enough to have lived in households in which aspects of sexuality were discussed reasonably freely. Phyl heard conversations between her mother and her aunt in the 1930s and 1940s: “Well, my aunt was a nurse, and she was a maternity nurse. She would be telling my mother all of these things that these patients had said and about that’s the last time the husband came near them...I probably first found out that route.”<sup>274</sup>

Magda, who was born in 1934, received almost no information at school, and was never given a book on the subject of sex education, but received some information from her father and sisters. Her parents were flexible when it came to sex: “I remember my Mom saying to my sister who was about to get married that when she asked Mom if she should have sex with her [future] husband, my Mom said ‘would you buy a dress without trying it on?’ But having said that, Mom wasn’t one for flaunting herself. She believed that sex was very beautiful and it was for people in love and should be treasured.”<sup>275</sup>

Fear of pre-marital pregnancy was often used by families in the early- to mid-twentieth century as a means of policing the sexual behaviour of daughters. Added to the daunting

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<sup>273</sup> Sarah, personal interview, 5 August 1998.

<sup>274</sup> Phyl, personal interview, 28 September 1998.

<sup>275</sup> Magda, email interview, 27 August 1998.

mystery of pregnancy itself was the moral condemnation of those who became pregnant outside marriage. Gossip about young women who did become pregnant before marriage, marginalization of single mothers, and religious and other forms of condemnation and judgement could operate quite effectively as deterrents to early sexual activity. That condemnation did not deter all from engaging in pre-marital sexual activity only served to intensify stereotypes about it. Those who strayed made very effective examples of young women “gone wrong.”

Magda was told a little about pre-marital sex and sexuality generally. “I found out... that my Mom and Dad had to marry,” she said. “But Dad often said that if we got pregnant that we would be responsible for that child, and would have to bring it up as well as we could. It may be noted here that none of my siblings ‘had’ to get married.”<sup>276</sup> Magda and her sisters were well aware that their parents made love on a frequent basis, a knowledge not typical of the narrators in this study. Magda came from a family that was, in many ways, more open and flexible about sexuality than those of other narrators. In addition to the greater amount of knowledge that she had about sex itself, Magda was also quite aware of anatomy. For example, she had been menstruating for nine months before her mother found out, not because she was ashamed of it but rather because “I just knew what to do and that it was natural.”<sup>277</sup>

When Jane was a teenager in the 1940s, she became close to an older female cousin who took her to dances. It was this cousin who had told Jane about sex. “She helped me grow up, helped me talk about my body and sex and everything. Things that I had never really known the truth about,” Jane remembered.<sup>278</sup> No-one had told Jean about menstruation, for example. Her elder sister had threatened her, saying that when she was older, she would get something she would not want, and Jane had no idea what she was talking about. She did find some

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<sup>276</sup> Magda, email interview, 27 August 1998.

<sup>277</sup> Magda, email interview, 10 June 1998.

<sup>278</sup> Jane, personal interview, 1 October 1998.

information in a book entitled *Marjorie's Twelfth Birthday*, which she discovered in her sister's drawer. It was after reading the book that Jane started talking to her cousin about sex. Her cousin told her about conception and childbirth.

Cheryl was told little about anatomy and sexuality, and nothing at all about menstruation. Neither she nor her friend Dolly knew what menstruation was, and any mention of it was phrased in euphemistic terms. When Cheryl's older sister Diane or Dolly's sister Selma got their periods, they did not want to go to the store for the Modess or Kotex, which they would call "the corn flakes in the blue box." In the late 1940s, they would send Cheryl and Dolly to the store for their sanitary supplies:

So we'd go over into the store, and we'd say 'Could we have some corn flakes in a blue box, please?' and old Mr. Mendelsson always knew what we wanted. He'd get it, put it in a brown paper bag, and pass it to us like we'd just done a drug deal or something, and we'd go home with this. So Dolly and I, being the smart, smart young girls that we were, we figured out why they had to use these. Both Selma and Diane had boyfriends at that point. They were doing it with their boyfriends. We didn't know what they were doing, but somebody told us, 'well, they have to wear those things when they're doing it with their boyfriends'...Every now and then we had to go and get some corn flakes in the blue box and we knew it was because they were doing it with their boyfriends.<sup>279</sup>

Cheryl discovered the truth in 1951, when she was ten. Her family went to visit her aunt in Ontario that year and Cheryl had her first period. "I got to sleep on this sort of chaise longue that they'd borrowed, that my aunt had borrowed from the neighbour," she said. "Well, I woke up in the morning to find a pool of blood and I thought I was dying. I didn't know that that's what Diane was using the stuff for! Oh, I got up, and I felt so awful." Cheryl thought that she had ruined the chaise longue, and tried to cover it up. When she felt faint, however, she had to summon her aunt, who explained menstruation to her. "Well, as best she could," Cheryl said, "but she neglected to tell me one very, very important thing - that it can carry on more than one

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<sup>279</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

day. She gave Cheryl one of the “corn flake things out of the blue. She was pregnant, so of course she wasn’t using them. Of course, I didn’t understand that either.” That evening, Cheryl’s period stopped for a few hours. “So I went to bed and I woke up the next morning in another pool. This time she was not impressed.” On her return home, Cheryl availed Dolly of her new knowledge: “Dolly was surprised when I told her it had nothing to do with Diane and Selma ‘doing it’ and it had everything to do with us getting older, and ‘it’s part of growing up, you know, and you’re going to be like this soon, too.’”<sup>280</sup>

Pam had not been told about menstruation when growing up in the 1940s, and her ignorance about childbirth left her vulnerable to scare-mongering. Some of her girlfriends

scared the hell out of me, about having a baby, I was going to be split from belly to you-know-what. To the point that I got extremely ill and came home...My mother wanted to know why I was being so ill, and told her I just found out where babies, and how babies came. And I was told ‘oh, that’s not true, that wasn’t the way it was,’ but however I was not given too much information.<sup>281</sup>

Because of the death of her parents during the Second World War, Betty was raised with the values of her very strict grandmother and the nuns at her school. The constraints on Betty’s behaviour, and that of the other girls in the convent, were tight. The girls therefore relied on each other to provide information. They took much delight in telling each other scandalous family stories at night, gathered around a single bed in the dormitory. Betty recalled one girl, a “very romantic kind of girl, who lived in a fantasy world - knights on white chargers and fairy queens and all that kind of thing” who kept a journal in which she wrote down her romantic stories and poems. A scandal occurred when it was discovered that she had written in her journal about an aunt who had eloped, and the journal was confiscated. Knowledge of this event caused Betty to avoid keeping a journal herself.

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<sup>280</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

<sup>281</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998.

Because Betty did not have close family, spending most of the year in the convent and staying with her grandparents only in the summer, she felt left out when others would tell their stories. The stories would often be about romance, relationships or sexuality. One evening, Betty recalled, one of the girls asked everyone to gather around her bed:

and she said ‘when I was at home, something dreadful happened.’ And we all went, ‘What? What? What?’ And she said ‘Well, my brother was home, and he’s four years older than me.’ And we all couldn’t see the significance of that, the importance of it. And she said, ‘I saw his thing.’ And she said ‘And I couldn’t say anything, and my eyes were open wide.’ And we said something like, ‘What thing?’ This is how innocent an awful lot of us were, you see. We’re talking about...maybe eleven-year-olds, somewhere in that age. And so she would proceed to explain what this thing was, and we all gasped with amazement. And then one or two others got brave and I can remember one girl saying ‘Oh, that’s nothing. I saw that years ago.’<sup>282</sup>

As the girls grew older, their night-time conversations changed. They discussed “magazines that we weren’t supposed to have, books that we weren’t supposed to read, and the more that got smuggled in the better.” They were able to get *Vanity Fair* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*. These higher-class publications spoke of “beautiful people who never got divorced or had unwanted children,” Betty commented. The *Women’s Weekly* was

for the little housewife who looked after the husband in those days, who everybody expected should get married. And she got married, and she had kids. The book wouldn’t tell you how the kids came, but how to wash the diapers, how to keep the husband happy. Nothing to do with sexually, but how to feed him and wash his shirts, and get the ring around the collar out, and all that sort of thing.<sup>283</sup>

They even read boys’ magazines that one of the girls was able to get from her brother. One of Betty’s friends later recalled that “those magazines were the best sex education she ever had.”<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Betty, personal interview, 28 September 1996.

<sup>283</sup> Betty, personal interview, 28 September 1996.

<sup>284</sup> Betty, personal interview, 28 September 1996.

Betty does not remember her grandmother teaching her anything about relationships or sexuality. She obtained most of her information from informal sources at the school. As it was a Catholic convent school, there was much that was not explained. The girls often asked at catechism how it was possible that the Virgin could have borne a child. The nuns were disinclined to explain. As a Protestant, Betty did not attend catechism with the other girls. She and the other nine Protestant girls were schooled in religious matters by a pastor who would visit. They asked him about the Virgin Mary, but he did not explain it either. One of the nuns would give them the proverbial “birds and bees” discussion when they were walking in the woods, but Betty found this to be most unenlightening. Betty remembered one young girl asking, “‘Sister, do we have pollen?’ and the sister said something to the effect of ‘In a manner of speaking, yes.’”

One of the nuns did believe that the children should be exposed to more explicit literature, because if the girls were sheltered, they would not be prepared for the outside world. She had to be careful about the parents, however. In Betty's opinion, middle-class people sent their girls to the convent to be “shielded from all the nasty things of the common people...and of course it *was* all the nasty things about the common people that were the most interesting in life...and so, of course, this was the most sought-after information...”<sup>285</sup>

The one saving grace in the convent was another nun “who we today would call a dyke,” Betty said, “because she would have her sleeves rolled up. She was a gardener. She would have her habit pulled between her knees and hooked in her rosary belt, and she’d be out there digging up this garden. She had a deep voice...”<sup>286</sup> Betty found her one day working with her tomatoes. The sister sat on her milking stool, and with a sable paintbrush she pollinated the tomatoes. When Betty asked why she was pollinating them, the sister replied that she wanted hybrid

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<sup>285</sup> Betty, personal interview, 28 September 1996.

<sup>286</sup> Betty, personal interview, 28 September 1996.

tomatoes. The nun explained the process of pollination and lamented the fact that the flower garden, which attracted the bees necessary for pollination, was at the other end of the property from the vegetable garden. Betty then asked the sister about humans and pollen. The sister replied:

‘No, child, we do not have pollen. We have sperm.’ So then I learned a new word. So then she said ‘You want to know about sperm?’ and I said ‘Oh yes.’ And I sat on the ground, in the dirt amongst the tomatoes by Sister’s knee, and that’s where I got my sex education. And she told me what happened between people, and then when she talked about the male and the female, she said ‘Do you know about the male body?’ and I said ‘One of the girls thought a man, her brother, had a thing,’ and she said ‘That’s it. That’s the thing we’re talking about.’ So then I’ve got the thing and the pollen and everything put together. And she told me in a down-to-earth, very easy-to-understand way. So can you imagine what the conversation was about *that* night in the dorm? I knew something that nobody else knew...and I told everybody ‘I have the biggest story you *ever* heard.’<sup>287</sup>

One or two narrators discovered information about sexuality under their own steam.

Louise describes herself as always having had a strong sense of sexuality, even when she was ten or eleven. “For a young girl, I was very well developed physically,” she said, “and quite often I would go to—this was when I was living in London—my father would give me money to go to a movie, and I was nearly always molested in the movie, which really pissed me off.”<sup>288</sup> She found this to be “quite disgusting,” and very different from what she had read about sexuality. She was reading “quite adventurous stuff” at the time, having acquired a taste for her mother’s “naughty” novels.

Cheryl cannot remember precisely when she discovered what “it” was, but knows that she knew of social disapproval at a young age. When she was approximately ten, her parents went away and left the younger children in the care of Diane. She awoke in the night and

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<sup>287</sup> Betty, personal interview, 28 September 1996.

<sup>288</sup> Louise, personal interview, 10 November 1998.

discovered that Diane was not in the bed. “So I thought that she was sleeping in Mom and Dad’s bed,” she said,

so I went looking for her, and when I went in to Mom and Dad’s room, yes, Diane was there. But so was Jimmy, her boyfriend, and I knew at that point that there was something wrong with that, because of the way she reacted. Frightened the hell out of her. ‘Don’t tell Mom and Dad,’ you know. She was just so afraid...So I knew there was something wrong with what she was doing, but I didn’t know what...So, somewhere along the line I knew something about, I guess Dolly and I decided to find out what “it” was. Maybe we found out, you know, whatever it was. But then again, I don’t think, I can’t remember that it was a big deal one way or the other, you know.<sup>289</sup>

When she was growing up, Cheryl did not see her brothers or parents undressed. Privacy was stressed, and “seeing one another’s privates, private parts was not something that was done in [Cheryl’s] family.” She was “very inhibited” when she was young, yet she knew enough about sexuality to know that there was an “it” that was tantalizing but forbidden (or perhaps tantalizing because forbidden), and that there were consequences for engaging in that kind of behaviour.

As a teenager in the 1950s, Veronica dated boys, but she did not feel close to them: “I had so many boyfriends...who really liked me, but I could never...and I liked them, but keep your distance kind of thing.”<sup>290</sup> Her first sexual encounters were with boys and were “experimentation.” Like many of the women in this study, she had been given almost no information about anatomy or sexuality when she was growing up. “There were some books or booklets by my bed or something,” she remembered. “I don’t think my mother even handed them to me. They were just there, and I think she had a friend come in and talk to me.”<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998. Cheryl’s own sexual relationships are discussed in Chapter Three.

<sup>290</sup> Veronica, personal interview, 27 September 1998.

<sup>291</sup> Veronica, personal interview, 27 September 1998.

Veronica does not remember ever being told about negative consequences of sexual activity. “I don’t think there was any discussion at all,” she remarked.

For several women, friends were the most important source of information about sexuality. Jill described finding out about sexuality from friends in the 1950s, by which time there was theoretically more information available: “I was quite naive. But I had my friend Julie, who I called Jules, and we were fascinated, her and I, with things, so we would discuss those kinds of subjects, and I learned a lot from her. I don’t know where she got her information, but that was a safe place to learn from, because I didn’t have anyone else.” Jill’s mother had not given her much information, telling her only about menstruation. “She just described menstrual blood, basically,” Jill said.

Sat me in the middle of the kitchen on a chair and paced around me like army sergeant and ordered me if anything happened to let her know immediately, and did I understand? Yes, I did understand. So when it happened I thought, this isn’t happening the way it’s supposed to be. There must be something wrong with me, so I didn’t go to her...And in those days they didn’t have all the movies and stuff like now. My friend Penny was given a little book to read by her mother, and so, I thought, ‘gee I wish I had one of those books. Why doesn’t my mum give me a book?’<sup>292</sup>

Jill was able to look at Penny’s book, but not to take it home to read. But the book was not particularly specific. “I had no idea what a fellow looked like or anything else,” she commented. “In fact, when I was about sixteen, Gail and I were with the manager at the time, and we were sitting down one night discussing things, and we both asked, ‘what does a man look like?’ and he sat and drew a diagram for us. I thought, ‘this is very strange. Is this what it looks like?’”<sup>293</sup>

The evidence discussed above reveals that the narrators were indoctrinated in dominant norms as children and adolescents but, like many women of their generations, they were given

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<sup>292</sup> Jill, personal interview, 30 May 1998.

<sup>293</sup> Jill, personal interview, 30 May 1998.

very little specific information about sexuality, even as late as the 1950s. Many had acquired a basic knowledge of reproduction but did not know the mechanics of love-making or of their own bodies. Like most heterosexual women, the early construction of their sexual subjectivities took place in a vacuum; they had somehow to understand their desires without having a framework in which to describe what they were feeling. The narrators did feel sexual desire when they were growing up, but they lacked a terminology to explain, even to themselves, exactly what it was that they felt and what they should (or should not, according to dominant norms) be doing about it. Only a few of the narrators did know, because of self-exploration, that the female body was a site of considerable pleasure and that there were certain things that could be done to enhance that pleasure.

### **Masturbation**

Masturbation had been a major concern of medical professionals and advice literature since the nineteenth century, yet it was a topic the narrators rarely addressed. Most either knew nothing about it or knew only that it was “bad.” Negative perceptions of masturbation were linked in the nineteenth century to fears about the sexuality of children and of the assumed “race suicide” of the white, middle class in Canada. Michael Bliss has shown that young Canadians at the turn of the century were reading such publications as *What A Young Boy Ought To Know* and *What A Young Girl Ought To Know*. Moralistic publications urged sexual restraint and the proper use of sexuality.<sup>294</sup> What these and other publications had to say about masturbation was either extremely negative or enigmatic, and was aimed primarily at boys and men. Perhaps because of notions of propriety and of female sexual passivity, masturbation among girls and women was rarely acknowledged in the early twentieth century.

The interwar and postwar eras, when notions of female sexual passivity had largely been eroded, was little better. Furthermore, as Angus McLaren points out, it is difficult to gauge the

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<sup>294</sup> See Michael Bliss, “‘Pure Books on Avoided Subjects’: Pre-Freudian Sexual Ideas in Canada.”

impact of injunctions against “self-abuse.” Medical professionals dealt mainly with people for whom aspects of sexuality were a problem. Even those progressive advocates of greater knowledge and understanding about sexuality were not advocating the pleasures of masturbation.<sup>295</sup> It is hardly surprising, therefore, that it was little discussed by parents of young girls. Those narrators who knew that it was not approved of did not remember being told anything specific about masturbation. Despite the long history of publications urging the elimination of masturbation, few parents, it seems, were willing to broach the subject directly with their children. But it may also be the case that reprimands early in life, even before they were old enough to read or to understand such phrases as “self abuse,” taught the narrators that they were not to touch themselves. It may also be the case, especially for girls, that notions of privacy and shame about the genitalia would have instilled in children a reluctance to masturbate.

A few of the narrators did discover masturbation when they were very young. Deborah started masturbating in 1939, when she was about nine years old: “I couldn’t wait for my parents to leave the house,” she said.<sup>296</sup> For Maureen, in the 1940s, it was a pleasure and a comfort in a life that involved little warmth and affection:

I don’t think I was much past ten when I learned about masturbation. I would never say the word, and this was my secret...I was very aware of how my body worked, and I knew how I craved touch - any kind of touch...I wasn’t aware of any attitudes [against it]. I discovered it through playing...or just such a skin hunger or hunger for touch of any kind. <sup>297</sup>

Jill reported experimenting with masturbation in her teens in the mid 1960s. “I did, when I was about sixteen, seventeen, and I didn’t feel anything,” she said. When nothing happened, she

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<sup>295</sup> Angus McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History*, 28-29.

<sup>296</sup> Deborah, personal interview, 29 September 1998.

<sup>297</sup> Maureen, personal interview, 29 May 1998.

thought “‘Maybe I’m a dead person or something. Maybe I’m doing this wrong. Maybe I’m not touching the right place, or...’ you know, you can go through all these things. I can’t, it didn’t do anything for me, so I thought oh dear, I felt frigid.”<sup>298</sup>

For those who did masturbate and for whom it was a pleasurable experience, touching oneself provided information about the pleasures of physical sexuality less available to others. It provided “hands on” experience, as it were. That knowledge would later prove useful in the exploration of sexual relationships with other girls. Maureen, for example, knew how to give physical pleasure and what areas of the body to explore precisely because she had done so with herself first. It was not that girls were ever encouraged to explore the bodies of other girls, of course—or even of boys—but rather that familiarity with one’s own body and the pleasures associated with it may have aided some young women when they began finally to explore desires for others of the same sex.

### **Physical Appearance and Dress**

As mentioned in Chapter One, gender performance was often associated with sexuality in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Unfeminine behaviour and appearance have long been assumed to be indicators of lesbianism, and lesbians have long been assumed automatically to be gender transgressors. The relevance of non-traditional attire to lesbian culture is predicated on 1970s lesbian-feminist norms and the heterosexist stereotypes that preceded them.

Historically, women who dressed androgynously or as men have been assumed to be lesbian. In many instances, such assumptions were and are accurate. Those women who placed themselves at risk of ridicule, assault and even prosecution because of their attire were often non-heterosexual in their romantic lives as well. However, to assume that all lesbian women dressed in masculine or less than traditionally feminine ways obscures the diversity of lesbian experience

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<sup>298</sup> Jill, personal interview, 30 May 1998.

in that it precludes from observation and recognition those lesbian women who appear traditionally feminine. As mentioned in Chapter One, the sexologists and psychologists whose writings on homosexuality set much of the tone of public discourse on the subject in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had great difficulty accounting for the feminine lesbian, often regarding her as a less authentic “sexual invert” than her masculine counterpart. Such assumptions were then enshrined within the lesbian community itself with the later lesbian-feminist discourse of gender-antagonistic androgyny, in which the lesbian “uniform” more closely approximated a butch or masculine gender performance than anything else.<sup>299</sup>

Only some of the narrators for this study recall an early preference for more masculine clothes, the traditional signifier of lesbianism. Most argued that they had no preference, and wore both pants and dresses. Sarah remembers that, while she wanted to wear what others were wearing when she was a young adult, she always had a more tailored appearance than her friends. “My mother would have liked me to be a cute little girl,” she said, “but I wasn’t a cute little girl.”<sup>300</sup> She wore “preppy” clothes.

Barb was a very tomboyish young woman and was very active around the farm, helping with the manual work: “Always known as a tomboy in the family...always like to wear my over-hauls [overalls], and my plaid shirts, and a straw hat. Oh boy. Spiffy!”<sup>301</sup> Her gender-bending behaviour was tolerated by her parents, who saw nothing unusual in it. She played most often

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<sup>299</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, lesbian political theory argued against gender and posited both femininity and masculinity as patriarchal in origin. Feminine behaviour and attire was especially the target of lesbian antagonism, symbolizing as it did to lesbian-feminists the oppression of women and particularly the making of women into sexual objects. In their attempts to remove gender from appearance and to adopt a genderless or “androgynous” self-representation, lesbians tended to wear pants rather than dresses, often cut their hair short, particularly in the 1980s, and refused to wear make-up or otherwise conform to feminine norms. The result was, of course, an appearance that was rather more masculine than truly androgynous.

<sup>300</sup> Sarah, personal interview, 5 August 1998.

<sup>301</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

with the boys, and did not care for the traditional pursuits of girls. She preferred the world of westerns, and would sometimes go into town to see a Roy Rogers or Gene Autry film:

After watching those movies I had to go home and play. I would be Gene Autry or I'd be Roy Rogers...my sisters were a little more, mmm, ladylike around home with Mum, you know...they liked to sew and knit...I tried it all, I tried...never could work out very well, so I gave that up.<sup>302</sup>

Barb “hated putting on a dress, or a skirt, or stockings, you know, nylons, and shoes shined up and, oh, boy. I didn’t like that at all...I always had over-hauls on...and always a plaid shirt, and my sisters were always in their skirt or dresses. Had my hair cut, squared off, like cut short. Just showing my ears.”<sup>303</sup>

As a rural child, Barb was probably lucky in that non-traditional dress was more tolerated than it would have been elsewhere, given that she participated so often in farm work, and she received rather less forced indoctrination in femininity than she might have had in an urban family. Her experience of being allowed to dress on most occasions in more boyish clothes is shared by Chris, who was raised in rural Québec in the 1940s and 1950s. Chris describes herself as having been a strong young woman who was used to doing heavy manual labour around the farm and wearing masculine clothes.<sup>304</sup>

Mary Louise Adams reveals that advice literature and films of the 1940s rarely explicitly linked “sissy” and “tomboy” behaviour with homosexuality because, she argues, to do so would have given credence to biological arguments about homosexuality and thus would have suggested the futility of the recent regulatory measures and sex education as a prophylaxis against social deviancy. To clearly link behaviour such as Barb’s with lesbianism would have suggested that there was a fixed and irrevocable connection between gender performance and

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<sup>302</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

<sup>303</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

<sup>304</sup> Chris, personal interview, 22 September 1998.

sexual orientation. If that were the case, then attempts to change the behaviour of “tomboy” girls would be pointless; the aberrant gender performance was simply a manifestation of an innate characteristic.

Instead, gender-bending behaviour among children was portrayed as an adolescent condition, often the result of poor parenting, that could be reversed, and it was not necessarily linked explicitly to homosexuality in the 1940s.<sup>305</sup> Sex education was the key to ensuring proper training of girls and boys in gender norms and in appropriate responses to the opposite sex. As sex education became more widespread and was more heavily influenced by ideas of child psychology in the 1950s and 1960s, it began more clearly to reflect the underlying assumption that gender behaviour was linked to psychological pathology. Tomboys, the subject of bemusement before the war, would become signs of femininity gone wrong in the postwar era.

Like Barb, Cheryl was a tomboy growing up and liked the movie stars Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, and Gene Autry. “I came out of those matinees always, always riding an imaginary horse, and I was never Dale Evans at any time. I was always Roy or Gene or Hopalong...or the Cisco Kid,” she said.<sup>306</sup> Her friend Dolly would play Dale Evans. Cheryl remembers that she wore a great number of hand-me-downs from her sister, because they were poor. Her mother made many of their clothes. Girls could not wear pants to school, although in the winter they were allowed to wear over-pants on the way to school, but then had to take them off and wear skirts or dresses. On Saturdays, however, she wore pants. She describes herself as “the classic tomboy” and believes that this, her admiration of male rather than female movie stars, and a crush she developed on her teacher were the only signs she had as a child that she was in any way different until she formed her first same-sex relationship as a teenager.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 95-98.

<sup>306</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

<sup>307</sup> Cheryl, interviewed by Claire Schneider, 20 January 1997.

There is not, however, any necessary and consistent link between childhood gender performance and sexual subjectivity. Not only do not all tomboys grow up to be lesbians, but also a large number of lesbians either conformed to prevailing norms of feminine dress and behaviour or dressed and played in variously “feminine” or “masculine” ways. Katie, for example, does not remember having a preference for feminine or masculine attire. She would wear either pants or dresses quite comfortably, and does not think that she was in any way a tomboy.<sup>308</sup> Anne, on the other hand, would play touch football and kick-the-can with the boys. Unlike many of the narrators, who describe their childhood recreation as tomboyish, Jane did not play with the boys and instead spent most of her time with girls. Her preferred style of dress was, however, “plain and tailored” and she did not like “frills on blouses or anything like that.”<sup>309</sup>

All the children in Magda’s family were expected to do chores, and it was in this area that Magda’s behaviour differed on gender lines. Magda most often did outdoor chores, while her sisters did many of the indoor ones. Magda remembers that her brothers went to war while she was growing up. She became the one in the family who shovelled the snow, cut the grass, and piled the firewood. Her sisters cooked, cleaned and baked. Magda was also very focused on sporting activities when she was growing up, and participated competitively in several sports.

It is Barb and Cheryl who best exemplify a common element in lesbian coming out narratives: unfeminine gender performance as children. Partially because masculinity has underwritten assumptions about lesbianism for decades, and partially because the lesbian-feminist discourse of androgyny, which became virtually hegemonic in lesbian communities in the 1970s and 1980s, reified the tomboy “baby dyke,” unfeminine behaviour during childhood has become one of the most enduring symbols of lesbian subjectivity. It is an attribute to which

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<sup>308</sup> Katie, personal interview, 1 October 1998.

<sup>309</sup> Jane, personal interview, 1 October 1998.

many lesbians refer fondly when telling their life stories, and it forms an early element in coming out narratives. Masculine gender performance is portrayed as the first clue to a lesbian identity. This, of course, negates the experiences of the many lesbians who never felt or acted in “unfeminine” ways as children and whose subjectivities do not include masculinity or androgyny. The dominant code of dress among lesbians is based upon the experiences of relatively few, and it should be acknowledged here that the narrators’ testimonies undercut rather than support any suggestion of gender transgression being an integral part of lesbian subjectivity.

It is unfortunate that femme narrators could not be found for this study, as their perspectives on growing up lesbian might have been somewhat different to those presented here. Unlike those women for whom gender transgression was an early element in lesbian subjectivity, femme women experienced same-sex desire without any link to opposite-gender preferences in terms of dress or recreation. None of the narrators identified strongly as femme. Pam, who commented “I guess I was femme, I suppose,” did not hold fast to a femme identity and moved to a more butch role in later relationships. Many of the narrators wore dresses and make-up as adults but were not ultra-feminine as adults or as children. Their gender performance as children and then as adults had perhaps more to do with traditional norms than with a deeply-held subjectivity.

### **The Spectre of the Homosexual: An Overt or An Implied Presence?**

Very few of the narrators had heard of homosexuality when they were growing up. The overwhelming majority reported that they did not hear words for same-sex relationships between women until well into their adulthood. Homosexuality was a topic that was almost never discussed in advice manuals or by parents before the Second World War. From the late 1940s on, in a context of growing influence of psychologists, Cold War fears about Communist threats to the nation’s stability, and increasingly strong links between Canadian and American security policy, homosexuality became one of the main forms of deviance against which “normal”

heterosexuality was defined, and public discourse on homosexuality increased. As Mary Louise Adams suggests, however, “homosexuality was constructed as so outside the normal teen experience that it was presented in all of the books as an external threat. Homosexuals were other people—not, certainly, teens themselves.”<sup>310</sup>

As Mona Gleason points out, psychologists and psychiatrists were an important part of the new public discourse about, and the increasing hostility towards, homosexuality, for it was their language of pathology and homosexual predatorship that fed many of the fears about the threat of the homosexual to the “normal” Canadian way of life.<sup>311</sup> While in the postwar era, Canadians received more information about homosexuality than had those of the previous generation, that information was couched in terms of sexual and gender deviance. The alleged cause of that deviance was often poor parenting, and particularly poor mothering, focusing the public gaze even more closely on the need for Canadians to live up to rigid definitions of heteronormativity.

Despite her relatively broad knowledge about sexuality, Sarah had not heard of lesbianism before her early twenties. It was when she was working as a stenographer and receptionist in Toronto in the 1930s that Sarah met her first lesbian, a woman who was a copywriter in the same advertising agency. This woman “and another gal took me up, you might say,” and they became friends. Others in the firm used to say of the woman that “she was all things to all people,” which Sarah found out meant that she had relationships with women. That was the first time that Sarah knew of the existence of lesbianism.

Sarah grew to know more about homosexuality during her time in Toronto. She was the only narrator to have read the Kinsey reports when they were published in 1948 and 1953. Because she read the newspapers and “moderately serious magazines”, Sarah kept informed

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<sup>310</sup> Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 92.

<sup>311</sup> Mona Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal*, 82.

about current events. She did not read the tabloids, although she does remember looking at the Toronto paper *Hush*. She knew of several gay people through workplace rumour. None of the gay people she knew lost their jobs because of their sexuality.

When Sarah became aware of her attraction towards women in the early 1960s, she began to research the subject of lesbianism. She read *The Well of Loneliness* and other works, and as her husband's health deteriorated she was able to read a range of lesbian books without him suspecting. She had, at some point in her young adult life, heard of the scandal surrounding the Radclyffe Hall's book when it was published, but did not read the book until she became more personally interested in the subject matter.<sup>312</sup>

When Lois was growing up, she had had no knowledge of lesbianism. Lois experienced her first attraction towards another girl at ten or eleven. She also previously had had crushes on teachers, and had been open enough about them for her sister to tell her that there was something wrong with her. Lois' first lesbian relationship occurred in 1940, in her first year of teaching.<sup>313</sup> Lois thinks that her parents suspected that she was a lesbian when she was in that first relationship, which lasted fifteen years, although much of that time they spent apart. She had thought that there was something wrong with her until she met that partner, also called Lois. Even then, however, she did not know of the words "gay" or "lesbian." She did not learn words for homosexuality until she began socializing at the Continental bar in Toronto. Lois does not care for the word "lesbian." "Gay" seemed to be something people used, and it was alright." Around that time, she read the pulp novel *The Price of Salt* and *The Well of Loneliness*. As already mentioned, *The Well of Loneliness* became probably the most famous lesbian novel of the twentieth century. Claire Morgan's *The Price of Salt*, published in 1952, was one of the most popular lesbian pulp novels of the postwar era, selling over one million copies by 1963.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Sarah, personal interview, 5 August 1998.

<sup>313</sup> This relationship is discussed in Chapters Three and Four.

Jill, the youngest of the narrators, had heard of homosexuality when she was growing up in the 1950s and early 1960s, although she heard primarily about gay men. She was aware of a lesbian couple who lived close by, and was familiar with some of the largely pejorative terminology used to describe gay and lesbian people. That knowledge, although framed in negative terms, did, however, give her a frame of reference for her own emerging desires.<sup>315</sup>

### **Early Same-Sex Attractions and Experiences**

As the subsequent chapters will argue, several factors were important in many of the narrators' journeys towards lesbian subjectivity. Whether one believes, as do many of these women, that sexual orientation is biological and that a lesbian or bisexual identity exists from birth or from a very young age, to be discovered at some point in life, or that sexual orientation is socially constructed and is but one element in an individual's multiple and changing *subjectivities*, it can be demonstrated that language, events, and relationships with other people are important components in the construction of lesbian narratives.<sup>316</sup>

The following chapters will demonstrate that, for many of these women, certain life events bolstered emerging lesbian or bisexual desires: awareness of terminology with which to describe and understand desires at odds with heteronormativity; physical exploration with another person of the same sex; one or more same-sex relationships; and the finding of community based on sexual orientation. Whether or not early same-sex desires resulted in a rapidly-acquired lesbian or bisexual identity depended often on whether or not they were understood as something qualitatively different and apart from heterosexuality, whether they

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<sup>314</sup> Yvonne Keller, "Pulp Politics: Strategies of Vision in Lesbian Pulp Novels, 1955-1965," in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (New York & London: Routledge, 1999), 2-3.

<sup>315</sup> Jill, personal interview, 30 May 1998.

<sup>316</sup> These factors, and the early relationships of some of the narrators, are discussed in Chapters Three, Four, and Five.

were explored with another person, and whether the individual recognized others to be like herself. Same-sex desires could too easily be discounted within heterosexist discourse as “a phase” or as curiosity about the female body. With the considerable pressure on women to court and marry men, and the concomitant lack of information about alternatives, many of the women in this study were largely unaware that they wanted something different, even if they experienced same-sex desires.

Anne experienced attractions towards girls at school, especially during her adolescent years. Three friends in particular were the objects of her crushes. When she was hospitalized with a burst appendix at the age of fourteen, she fell for two of the nurses. “Oh, I was so enamoured of them,” she recalls. “After I got out, I’d get them to meet me in town to have a cup of tea or something.” It is unclear how Anne managed to get the nurses to meet socially with her. Anne was dating boys in her teens, however, and was sexually active with them. She did have a pregnancy scare when she was seventeen, and eventually had to confess to her mother that she was no longer a virgin. Anne’s mother took her to the doctor who had performed the appendectomy, who informed her that she was not pregnant. She had a second pregnancy scare in her early twenties. Anne did not find out until many years later that the peritonitis had destroyed her fallopian tubes, and she could not have become pregnant.

Anne was also attracted to her aunt, who was herself a lesbian. Her mother knew, apparently. Her aunt “lived with women, one after the other, in Los Angeles,” Anne remembers. She and her mother visited her aunt when Anne was sixteen, and Anne fell in love with her aunt. She believes that her aunt was also attracted to her, “but I was way too young, and I was her niece. We didn’t have anything to do with each other, except that we had an immense attraction, and my mother saw it. She saw it. She knew. In fact, she was jealous because I liked [her] so much.”<sup>317</sup> Anne identifies the attraction to her aunt as a pivotal moment in the formation of her

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<sup>317</sup> Anne, personal interview, 1 May 1998.

sexuality, but she does not think that she thought of it in relation to such words as “lesbian.” “I just knew I was attracted to [her],” she says. It was both a love and a physical attraction. She remembers particularly a night when her aunt came in to kiss her goodnight, “just like an aunt would, you know. But I mean, that was real important to me.”<sup>318</sup> Anne was also attracted to the girls her brother went out with when they were in high school. “I loved him so much that I identified with him,” she comments. It is interesting that Anne attributes her attraction to these girls to her love for her brother rather than to an emerging bisexual or lesbian orientation.

Anne had her first experience of physical sexuality with a woman at college. Anne regards herself as having been bisexual during her university student years. “After I went to college, of course, I didn’t play with the boys any more, except then I dated them.” She formed the majority of her relationships, with both women and men, in university settings in the United States.<sup>319</sup> Her ascription of the word “bisexual” to her activities is a recent one; Anne did not use any of the common words describing sexual orientation about herself until the late 1960s, when the gay and then the lesbian rights movement made the terminology both more available and more acceptable. In her college days, Anne simply followed her desires, and she was bisexual in her desire.

It was when she was fifteen that Louise realized that she “found girls very, very attractive” and would get into very intense friendships. Louise believes that her unusual childhood made other girls more attractive to her, as they had “normal” family lives. One girl, Phyllida, from “a very county family,” was “so gorgeous. I can see her now. She had the most unusual shaped mouth. It was so lovely.” Phyllida was, unfortunately, “quite straight.” Louise’s other serious crush was on a girl called Joy, who was “very, very pretty, and she had the most gorgeous body.”<sup>320</sup> They used to take a break during classes and “dash to the toilets and get in

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<sup>318</sup> Anne, personal interview, 1 May 1998.

<sup>319</sup> Those relationships are discussed in Chapters Three and Four.

the same one, and kiss and feel each other all over, and then go back to class.” The fact that they could have been found out only “added spice to the whole thing.”<sup>321</sup>

In her late teens, Louise used to go to dances as often as possible, and would visit the clubs in Soho. Many of the club owners were women, and most of Louise’s friends were female. After one too many arguments, Louise’s mother told her to leave. Louise and a friend found a room in a rooming house run by an ex-Folies-Bergère showgirl. Louise comments that “there were some very bizarre people living there.” Louise went out with her female friends and their boyfriends, who came to resent her presence. “I didn’t realize that I was so attracted to the women,” she said. “I wanted nothing to do with the men whatsoever. And then one day...I got tickets to go to the theatre, and her man was there, and he got really angry when she asked if she could go to the theatre and said, you know, ‘You’re going with that lesbian again.’ I thought, lesbian? What’s a lesbian? So I had to go and look it up in the dictionary.”<sup>322</sup>

Although most of her friends were women, Louise did not have enough of a sense of her sexual orientation to know “what to do about it.” She knew that she did not want to get married, and consequently she knew that she was different to most people. She was having “a wild time” but was growing tired of her life. It was a female friend, to whom Louise was attracted but who was heterosexual and was getting married, who gave her the idea of coming to Canada, as she and her fiancé were making the trip. Eventually, Louise made friends with a lesbian couple and a gay man and would socialize with them. “But I never found anybody,” she said. She thinks that perhaps she was too critical at the time. It was not until she met a woman at work with whom she had an affair that Louise was made aware of her sexual orientation.<sup>323</sup> After that affair, she

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<sup>320</sup> Louise, personal interview, 10 November 1998.

<sup>321</sup> Louise, personal interview, 10 November 1998.

<sup>322</sup> Louise, personal interview, 10 November 1998.

<sup>323</sup> That relationship is discussed in Chapter Three.

did not become involved with anyone. Louise has remained aware of her attraction towards women, but has chosen not to act on it.<sup>324</sup>

Jerry had for some time been having feelings of attraction towards girls and women. As revealed in Chapter Three, Jerry began having same-sex relationships in her early teens. She had known since grade three or four that she was not attracted to men: “I knew years before because when I was going to public school, I had this uncontrollable urge with a woman....”<sup>325</sup> She developed a crush on a girl in her church group, to the point that she was extremely upset when that girl was not the one chosen for Jerry to kiss in a play put on by the group. Jerry later developed crushes on other female friends, and was caught holding hands with one of them in a film theatre. It was when Jerry made the mistake of confessing her feelings for a female friend of the family who lived next door that her sexuality became known to her family. She reported:

My father said to me, ‘You’re going to see the padre.’ And I said, ‘why?’ And he said, ‘You’re just going to see him.’ And then when I got in front of him [the padre] he turned around. He said to me, ‘do you know what a lesbian is?’ I said ‘no.’<sup>326</sup>

Jerry had been aware enough of her emerging sexuality to have had pornographic magazines under her mattress when she was growing up. She had obtained two magazines from another girl when she was thirteen or fourteen, and remembers that they were very explicit for the period. They were not entirely lesbian in content, but were “enough to pique my interest. Enough to let me know exactly what I wanted. Enough to let me know exactly what I was because I had no interest in men in any way, shape or form.”<sup>327</sup> Jerry’s awareness of her

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<sup>324</sup> As is revealed in Chapter Three, her initial choice not to explore relationships with women further was made because of the severely negative reaction she received from a psychiatrist when, after that first relationship, she told him that she thought she was a lesbian.

<sup>325</sup> Jerry, personal interview conducted by Elise Chenier, Lesbians Making History project (LMH), 23 November 1992.

<sup>326</sup> Jerry, interview conducted by Elise Chenier, 23 November 1992.

lesbianism was enough to propel her towards some of the lesbian hangouts on Yonge Street after she and her family moved to Toronto, and shortly after meeting other lesbians she left home and joined the lesbian community.

Betty did not come out as a lesbian until 1994, but can identify attractions she had towards women from a very young age. Many of the girls, including Betty, had crushes on the nuns, “and the nuns responded.” Betty thinks that in some cases the affection would be a mother-daughter relationship, but in others it was sexual or romantic. There were also relationships between girls at the school. In one case, there was a duel between two girls over a prefect on whom both had crushes. Both girls were members of the fencing club, and one challenged the other to a fencing duel in the gymnasium. No masks or protective clothing were allowed in the duel. The challenger turned up not with a fencing foil, but with a rapier she had taken from the fencing Sister’s study. The other girl was run through the shoulder and back and bled profusely. The other girls, who did not fully comprehend the seriousness of the event, saw it as “high drama” and were ecstatic. The challenger was expelled from the school. It was very common for the younger girls to have crushes on the seniors. Betty believes that most seniors did not succumb to the adoration, but remarks that “what happened between the older girls might be another story.”<sup>328</sup> She remembered that the sisters cautioned the older teenagers against romantic friendships. Relationships were reported immediately to the Mother Superior. One senior fell in love with one of the nuns, and in that case the feeling was reciprocated. “The sister left the order,” Betty said, “and they left it together.”

Betty, although she had several crushes, was unable to recognize the nature of her feelings towards other girls and women. She had a “violent” crush on one of her close friends. Because so many of the girls had crushes, she did not know that her feelings were in any way unusual or that “it wasn’t normal.” Left alone one day, they kissed, put an arm around each

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<sup>327</sup> Jerry, interview conducted by Elise Chenier, 23 November 1992.

<sup>328</sup> Betty, personal interview, 28 September 1996.

other, and held hands. It went no further, however, and Betty did not explore those feelings again. Betty remained so well inculcated in heterosexuality that she is sure that she never even knew what a lesbian was until very recently.

Katherine began to experience attraction towards women when she was in high school, although those early attractions were not sexual, in her view. She had heard various words, such as “queer”, used to describe homosexual men, but had never heard of lesbianism. She therefore had no framework within which to place her emerging same-sex desires. After she came to Canada, she experienced more forceful attractions towards female colleagues in firms in which she worked. It was not until just after the period under study that Katherine had a sexual relationship with a woman, however.<sup>329</sup>

Magda reports that she was not told anything about relationships between people of the same sex, but “most thought it to be unforgiving [sic].”<sup>330</sup> The only gay person she knew when she was growing up was the teacher with whom she formed a sexual relationship. When growing up, Magda had known that she was different but was not aware of the nature of her difference until she became attracted to her French teacher. She had, however, always liked girls more than boys but played with boys rather than engaging in traditionally female pursuits.<sup>331</sup>

Veronica was not told anything about homosexuality when she was growing up. It was not until she was an adult, and the topic of homosexuality was discussed more openly, that she heard of gay men and lesbians. Despite the lack of information, however, she was able to identify the fact that her English teacher, on whom she had a crush, was in a relationship with another woman:

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<sup>329</sup> Katherine, personal interview, 25 September 1998.

<sup>330</sup> Magda, email interview, 10 June 1998.

<sup>331</sup> Magda, email interview, 14 August 1998.

all of a sudden, we were very aware that she had a woman friend and we were so intrigued that we used to follow them around. Marilyn [Veronica's partner] lived not too far from where this English teacher lived and we'd drive by. I'd be staying over at her place or something, and in the morning we'd drive. I guess we found that intriguing. Sure enough, there would be Miss W's car outside of the apartment building, you know. I mean, still we didn't know what it was all about.<sup>332</sup>

When asked if she and Marilyn speculated whether or not the two women were also making love to each other, as Veronica and Marilyn were, Veronica said "I guess. Yeah, I guess. But I just loved this woman. She was a very special teacher too."<sup>333</sup>

When she was twelve or thirteen, Cheryl became close to a girl who was very physically affectionate. They used to hold hands going to and from school, and Cheryl "always thought this was the greatest thing since sliced bread." "It just made me feel so great," she remarked, "that this girl was holding my hand." In a gesture that spoke of both heterosexual and butch gender norms, Cheryl played the gentleman when they were out:

my father used to walk on the outside, 'cause it was the thing to do, you know? My mother never got to walk on the curb side of the road when they were walking. He always walked on the outside because that's what gentlemen were supposed to do. Well...we'd walk hand-in-hand, but I always placed myself on the outside. And I, I don't think she noticed, but I noticed. I always felt that I needed to be the protector, you know, the one that if anyone was going to get splashed by the traffic, it would be me. Who's the guy, Sir Walter Raleigh? I would have done that too.<sup>334</sup>

Although Cheryl did not realize it until later, this relationship was her first crush. When they held hands, Cheryl would feel "warm inside" and she used to wonder what it would be like to kiss her friend. It was not reciprocated, however. Her friend acquired a boyfriend, and soon the friendship fizzled. Cheryl also remembers having a crush on her teacher in Grade One.

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<sup>332</sup> Vicki, personal interview, 27 September 1998.

<sup>333</sup> The relationship between Vicki and Marilyn is explored in Chapters Three and Four.

<sup>334</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

Sarah did have same-sex attractions when she was young, and regards this as the reason that she does not consider being gay “a momentous thing.” Had she been aware of it when she was growing up, she thinks, “it would have given me a permanent chip on the shoulder on the subject,” because of the “hard time” that she might have had in business had her sexuality been known. When asked if, in hindsight, she could recognize anything in her childhood or during her marriage that might have indicated that she were a lesbian, Sarah commented that she was “always a take-charge sort of person, and I have a feeling that an awful lot of lesbians are like that.” It was not until the early 1960s, when Sarah was fifty, that she realized that she “was in the wrong spot.” She became aware that she wanted to be “more than just a friend” to a woman she had grown close to. Sarah had always wanted to have “a close woman friend. I think that was probably telling me something which I didn’t catch on to at the time.”<sup>335</sup>

Unlike many of the narrators, Sarah did not have passionate crushes on teachers or other women in her life when she was growing up. It may be that the lack of an attraction the strength of which might have driven her to explore same-sex relationships earlier stalled the development of her non-heterosexual subjectivity. After all, it was not until she had such an attraction that she felt that she was “in the wrong spot.” Prior to that, her heteronormative training seems to have prevented the development of a lesbian subjectivity. Further, her firm belief in the promise she made at marriage would have precluded most, if not all, attractions towards anyone but her husband.

In Sarah's opinion, it has always been relatively easy to identify lesbians. She can remember seeing women that she thought probably were lesbians when she was quite young. “Mostly hairstyle and way of swashbuckling around,” she says. She had short hair herself when she was young. Sarah remembers that during World War II there were people “who always wore slacks. And I wore them too, but I didn’t realize why I did, let’s put it that way, ‘cause I

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<sup>335</sup> Sarah, personal interview, 5 August 1998.

thought they were comfortable.”<sup>336</sup> Sarah is here affirming the general assumption of the time about women who wore pants: that they were lesbian. But she is also indicating here a belief in the innateness of her sexual orientation. In stating that there was a reason, unknown to her at the time, for her wearing pants, Sarah is both reinforcing the stereotype and also suggesting that there was a part of her character—her sexuality—that existed but of which she was not yet aware, something that could be identified in hindsight by reference to a style of dress. Sarah’s wardrobe is a symbol in the coming out narrative, an “essential” and symbolic attribute whose meaning became clear later in life.

For Sarah, being lesbian is about preferring the company of women. She accounts for this by stating that her mother was a strong woman. She believes that sexual orientation is genetic, and suggests that it was upbringing that kept many women from realizing a lesbian identity. “That aura around you, what a woman should do or be, or something like that. I was not very much in favour of doing exactly what everybody thought I should do, and I must admit my mother didn’t feel I should.” Sarah’s mother had, however, inculcated in her the belief that if one promises to do something, then one should do it. When she married, it was her feeling that she had promised to “love, honour and obey her husband,” and therefore she stayed with her husband until his death.<sup>337</sup>

### **Heterosexuals in Training?**

The women whose stories form the basis of this study received, for the most part, a standard indoctrination in heterosexual norms as they were growing up. In keeping with the style of the day, however, much of the training they were given took euphemistic and indirect forms. These women were given rather vague information about what to expect from life, and

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<sup>336</sup> Sarah, personal interview, 5 August 1998.

<sup>337</sup> Sarah, personal interview, 5 August 1998.

particularly from marriage, their expected destiny. While all were aware, on at least some level, that pregnancy outside marriage was to be avoided, the physical acts themselves that would result in such an occurrence were rarely discussed. Even the nature of the emotional relationship between the ideal heterosexual couple was hardly referred to.

Women were left to discover for themselves what was involved in heterosexual courtship and sexuality. A few, such as Barb and Cheryl, had barely any heterosexual contact, and certainly did not venture as far as intercourse. Others explored heterosexuality more fully and enjoyed heterosexual sex at the time, either not experiencing same-sex desires or feeling but suppressing them. Some chose sexual relationships with both women and men. A very few had sexual experiences only with girls and women. Yet most were raised with little information about sexuality, very few knew anything whatsoever of homosexuality, and only a handful had explored the pleasures of their own bodies.

What, then, drew these women on different paths, some through marriage and motherhood and only later to a lesbian subjectivity, and some more quickly to lesbian and bisexual relationships and then to community socializing on the basis of their sexual orientation? It is argued here that it was largely the congruence of early same-sex desires with other, affirming events in these women's lives that influenced the path they took. The "single and solid moments of concentrated emotion" in these women's lives were moments of affirmation in sexual exploration, in intimate and friendship relationships, and in community. In those moments, when same-sex desire was affirmed as positive, as loving, and as shared, a subjectivity based on same-sex attraction was under construction. The greater and more frequent the affirmation, the more likely these women were to form a lesbian or bisexual subjectivity early in their lives.

The following chapters will demonstrate the importance of intense emotional and physical relationships in the formation of early lesbian subjectivities. The early same-sex experiences of many of the women discussed in this chapter were transitory and did not involve

deep and long-term emotional connection. They were consequently less formative of subjectivities based on same-sex attraction than the kinds of relationships I shall discuss in Chapters Three and Four. Without such strong bonds, it was easy for women to dismiss early same-sex sexuality as experimentation or as a phase.

Heteronormative discourse was such a potent force in women's lives that same-sex desires could be explained away, ignored and buried unless reinforced by intensely physical or deeply emotional relationships with women. Training women for heterosexuality did not only involve instilling in them the attributes of femininity, the skills of matrimony, and the desire for motherhood. It also involved, for many women, the suppression or removal of desires which contradicted heteronormativity. Little wonder, then, that many who experienced same-sex desires when young lived heterosexual lives in adulthood until coming to non-heterosexual subjectivities. Same-sex desires would require affirmation in relationships that were not easily explained away if they were to develop into early lesbian or bisexual subjectivities.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Questions of Sex: Female-Female Relationships and Physical Sexuality

One of the most difficult things to determine about the lives of women thought to have been lesbians in the early- to mid-twentieth century is whether or not they had physical sexual relationships, and, if they did, in which sexual practices they engaged. Given that women generally were somewhat reluctant to record their sexual activities, scant information exists on same-sex female sexuality. What few written sources do exist, such as the collections of letters and journals examined in this study, are phrased in somewhat enigmatic terms when it comes to expressions of desire and of physical intimacy. Such written sources must therefore be supplemented by the use of oral history, for in interviews the historian can ask probing questions which establish that lesbian women before the 1960s did, indeed, have a genital sexuality.

This chapter analyses the nature of sexual relationships between women in the years before feminism spoke loudly of the sexual workings of the female body. I situate this study in relation to two of the major problems that have emerged in recent years in debates over lesbian history: periodization and the importance of genital sexuality. It is often argued that the early twentieth century was a period of gradual (some would say rapid) increase in the availability to the general public of sex education, sexualized romantic fiction, and medical terminology concerning sexuality.<sup>338</sup> A corollary of this argument is that members of the public became increasingly aware of gay and lesbian communities and individuals, especially after the Second World War. Implicit in such a thesis is the idea that those growing up between 1910 and 1965 must necessarily have been more aware of homosexuality and of the negative attitudes towards it than were those of the previous generations. The evidence outlined in this chapter suggests that this was not necessarily the case.

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<sup>338</sup> See, for example, Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal.*, 158-165; Sherrie A. Innes, *The Lesbian Menace*; Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics & Society*; Angus McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History*; and Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*.

I argue here that most of the women discussed in this dissertation did come to express their same-sex attractions physically, even though initially many of them were almost as “innocent” of sexual knowledge as were middle-class women of the nineteenth century. What was different was that it was no longer the case that women were thought to be sexually passionless. There was at least an acknowledgement that women could feel sexual passion, yet any such feelings were still thought appropriate only within heterosexual matrimony. Young women growing up in the twentieth century, before the advent of lesbian feminism, remained, in most cases, as ignorant of lesbianism as were the young women of their mothers’ and grandmothers’ generations. Despite this vacuum in female sexual knowledge, many of these women discovered and enjoyed physical sexual relationships with other women.

In this chapter, I examine the written records of several early twentieth-century lesbian women and one bisexual woman, and the oral testimonies of those narrators who clearly had physical relationships with other girls or women in the period under study. These sources demonstrate that the naiveté with which young women often approached their first sexual relationship in the years before feminism and the “sexual revolution” resulted in both uncertainty and curiosity about sexual matters, probably rather more than would occur in the present day. To be sure, the material available to the public in this period acknowledged the sexuality of both men and women, and sought to build an enjoyable sexual relationship between the sexes, yet its primary goal was still to ensure the sexual satisfaction of married couples and the healthy development of the (white) race.

And while more explicit manuals might have been available to adults in Canadian society, the majority of the literature available to young people was enigmatic on some of the crucial aspects of the sexual relationship. The sexual enjoyment of girls, especially in genital terms, was rarely discussed. Moreover, even those who were urging the more comprehensive education of young people in the matter of sex relied upon parental willingness to offer such information to their children, a behaviour not customary or comfortable to parents whose own

education had been more restricted. Just as today ignorance about sexuality remains surprisingly common in a world lamented as overly sexualized, so too in the early and mid-twentieth century the youth of Canada—supposedly under the influence of too much sexual information—could remain unaware of basic information about sexual relationships. That was especially the case with women’s sexuality, and same-sex women’s sexuality in particular.

An important consideration in lesbian history is the nature of the sex act, most especially of sex acts thought to be determining of lesbian status. What is it that makes a lesbian a lesbian? Perhaps one of the most significant works in lesbian history remains Lillian Faderman’s *Surpassing the Love of Men*, in which Faderman described as “lesbian” the “romantic friendships” of middle-class women in the nineteenth century, while maintaining that lesbianism did not have to include a compulsory genital sexuality.<sup>339</sup> Faderman made a groundbreaking contribution to lesbian history in reclaiming for the historical record the stories of passionate relationships between women who had previously been regarded only as spinsters who lived together. Her claim that this form of lesbianism probably did not have a genital component, however, caused a flurry of comment, given the highly politicized nature of lesbian community and of lesbian history itself. Critics of Faderman’s work commented that she had desexualized lesbianism, including as lesbian women who were not “true” lesbians and thus reducing lesbianism’s challenge to heterosexism.

The debate over who was and was not a true lesbian has been taken up by a number of historians. Sheila Jeffreys’ response to the debate was to suggest that the definition of lesbianism as based on genital contact, which had its origins in the sexology of an earlier century, should be questioned so as to challenge the heterosexual foundations on which it was based. She cautioned, however, that such a questioning would involve a questioning also of lesbian identity, based for so long on the assumption of a genital sexuality.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 17-18.

A key to the claim that nineteenth-century romantic friendships did not involve genital sexuality is Faderman's assumption that women who did not know of it from public discourse would likely not engage in it. Faderman argues that most love relationships occurring between women before the twentieth century would be less physical than those of present times because "females were encouraged to force any sexual drive they might have to remain latent."<sup>341</sup> Faderman is certainly correct in asserting that women were told, in the nineteenth century particularly, that they were sexually passive, if not completely devoid of sexual passion, and that many middle-class women internalized that view of womanhood. She is also correct, in my opinion, in suggesting that other elements of romantic friendships, such as lifelong attachments to women, expressions of adoration and loyalty, and the setting up of a home with another woman, are sufficient to suggest that they should be included in a history of lesbianism, even if many of the relationships were less sexually intimate than might be the case today. But Faderman falls into the trap of reifying the discourse of non-sexual middle-class romantic friendships when she suggests that notions of (respectable) female passivity would probably have precluded an awareness of sexual passion on the part of the women she discusses. Not only does such a claim fly in the face of such notable evidence as the diaries of Anne Lister<sup>342</sup>, but it is also a little naive to suggest that the absence of public discourse on any behaviour necessarily precludes the possibility of that behaviour occurring.

If one is to suggest that women of the mid-twentieth century were more knowledgeable about sexuality than women of earlier generations because of the greater availability of information on sexuality and because of a more liberal acceptance of female sexuality, and thus that they were more likely to have engaged in genital intimacy, one is implying generally that a

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<sup>340</sup>Sheila Jeffreys, "Does It Matter If They Did It?," 22-4; 28.

<sup>341</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 19.

<sup>342</sup> Helena Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart*. Lister's very unusual diaries show clearly that she engaged in genital sexuality with numerous women.

public discourse on a behaviour is required for that behaviour to occur. This chapter challenges such a viewpoint, arguing instead that even those nineteenth- and early twentieth-century relationships phrased very much in the noble, moral, and spiritual terms of the “romantic friendship” could often be physical ones. The evidence gained in this study shows clearly that women in the early twentieth century, in contexts of considerable silence regarding sexuality, did engage in physical sexuality with other women. It also shows that young women who grew up in the postwar era, and who might be assumed to have greater knowledge about sexuality, did not necessarily possess any greater knowledge than did women of the 1920s. They nevertheless sought and achieved a physical sexuality with other women.

Lesbian history has, for too long, discussed sexuality very much in the abstract. Lesbian history is about real people, with real bodies, and real desires. The women discussed in this chapter desired other women, many of them beginning to recognize that desire even as children. When opportunities presented themselves, they acted on those desires, most of them moving very quickly to a genital sexuality. Manual stimulation was the most common form of sexual practice in their early sexual lives with women, but many moved on quite quickly to oral sex as well. Few used or had heard of dildos, however. While several of the women describe these beginnings as moments of exploration and experimentation, others maintain that they did what came “naturally.” Yet most describe their childhoods as lacking in information about bodies and sexuality. Only a few had masturbated as children. How, then, were they able to know what came “naturally”?

The majority of the women interviewed in this study were raised between 1930 and 1965, in an era when the value of sex education was being argued more forcefully than before, and in which a wider range of medical opinion about sexuality, including homosexuality, was published in sources other than medical journals. Yet the women spoke frequently of ignorance about lesbianism, or, indeed, about any form of sexuality. Moreover, they were raised by parents who, although living as adults in this new and “expressive” world, still operated in their parenting

under the same feelings of modesty and restraint with which they themselves had been raised. To suggest, therefore, that these women were more knowledgeable than their foremothers may be misleading. The evidence discussed here suggests that almost all lesbians before lesbian-feminism still lived very much “in the dark.” We cannot, therefore, necessarily assume that they were any more likely to have had genital relationships than were lesbians of the early twentieth century and, indeed, the nineteenth century. That they did have genital relationships in such a context of silence about sexuality may suggest to us that earlier relationships should also be read with a view to genital content as well.

But to restrict sexuality to the genital is to reify the oppressive terms with which much sexual practice has been relegated to the realms of “foreplay.” A few historians have begun to argue that non-penetrative and non-genital forms of sexual expression should also be counted as sex. One such is Karen Hansen, whose article “No Kisses Is Like Youres” examines the relationship between Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus, two mid-nineteenth-century African-American women whose physical contact included the fondling of breasts. Hansen has called this “bosom sex,” and argues that, while it would be inappropriate to call the relationship a lesbian one because the term was not part of the period’s cultural consciousness, bosom sex “may have been viewed as natural, pleasurable, and an appropriate means of expressing affection for or attraction to another woman.”<sup>343</sup> Hansen regards the Brown-Primus relationship as much more than mere sentiment, calling it rather “a selfconsciously sexual relationship.”<sup>344</sup> Cases such as the above are a welcome addition to an otherwise dry and narrow lesbian history that rests upon the requirement for genital sexuality or the assumption that it has occurred.

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<sup>343</sup> Karen V. Hansen, “‘No Kisses Is Like Youres’: An Erotic Friendship between Two African-American Women during the Mid-Nineteenth Century.” *Gender & History* 7, 2 (August 1995), 200.

<sup>344</sup> Karen V. Hansen, “‘No Kisses Is Like Youres’,” 183.

This study treats as potentially indicative of a lesbian relationship a diverse range of intimacies, from sleeping together to full vaginal penetration. Following Faderman, I argue that relationships between women need not have included a genital component to be called lesbian relationships, especially when available source material indicates other behaviours consonant with the type of relationship found in heterosexual marriages, such as continued sleeping together, expressions of love and extreme devotion, and other forms of intimacy. I would, however, disagree with Faderman that we can with certainty suggest that, in any era of history, women probably would not have engaged in genital contact with other women. This study argues, as others have, that the absence of testimony in women's written sources of genital sexuality between women is more the result of linguistic constraints than it is an actual absence of genital contact. The evidence provided here adds a Canadian perspective to this still-vibrant debate, and suggests that the tendency to equate ignorance about sexuality with a lack of exploration of its genital aspects has led to the erasure of some important elements of lesbian history.

Historical literature on sexuality has also suffered from a dichotomization of sexual behaviour that results in the erasure of bisexual lives from the historical record. The lack of investigation into same-gender desire in people assumed to be heterosexual is part of this elision, but there is also considerable intolerance of bisexuality within the lesbian and gay history community. The most recent exposition that illustrates this point is Martha Vicinus' "Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?" Vicinus argues for "the primacy of a continuum of women's sexual behaviors, in which 'lesbian' or 'lesbian-like' conduct can be both a part of, and apart from, normative heterosexual marriage and child-bearing."<sup>345</sup> Including as "lesbian-like" same-sex activity on the part of women in heterosexual marriages, while clearly differentiating their behaviour from "lesbian" behaviour, comes dangerously close to the old

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<sup>345</sup> Martha Vicinus, "Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?"  
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inference that such women are heterosexuals merely “experimenting” with lesbianism, which avoids the possibility that they might be bisexual. Conversely, Vicinus’ continuum suggests that bisexual women, whose behaviour may be “lesbian-like,” can be included in a history of lesbians. In either case, bisexual women fall yet again through the cracks of history. Vicinus probably does not intend to subsume bisexual women within the category “lesbian,” but her notion of “lesbian-like” behaviour allows historians of women’s sexuality to avoid the responsibility and the difficulty of separating lesbian and bisexual women’s historical sources.

It has proved very difficult to locate women who identified as bisexual in Canada before 1965. This may in part be due to the fact that bisexuality, as an identity, was not openly talked about until the late 1970s and the 1980s. In the period under study, therefore, bisexual women may not have had a framework within which to explain their desires. Moreover, as Chapter Five will demonstrate, there existed considerable suspicion about and hostility towards bisexual women in the lesbian community. Bisexual women remained in the community only for a short time, many leaving to live heterosexual lives outside. Others, who felt that they were bisexually active for a time before realizing their lesbianism, moved permanently into the lesbian community and adopted a lesbian identity. This chapter takes issue with Vicinus’ notion of “lesbian-like” behaviour and instead suggests that bisexual behaviour should, in many cases, be treated separately from same-sex behaviour. Differentiating those women whose desire for both sexes was lifelong from those women whose participation in heterosexual behaviour *was* a normative step on a trajectory towards lesbianism is an important next step for historians of non-heterosexual women’s history.

In several cases, the women in this study did have a period of “bisexual” behaviour as they negotiated their “coming out” process. Their sexual relationships with men occurred before they were able to live fully as lesbians. Some were married, but had desires for or acted sexually with women at the same time. But these women argue that they had always been lesbian and had only to find the right person or community to be able to live the life fully. Despite the fact that

they did not, in the period before 1965, describe themselves as lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual, they regard their behaviour as merely a step on the path towards the realization of their lesbian identity, something they did only because it was what society said they should do. As will be suggested later, such a linear and progressive portrayal has been crucial to these women's construction of a sense of self in a homophobic environment. Whether or not they possessed, before 1965, a repressed lesbian identity, it may fairly be said that they did not experience desire for, or physical pleasure with, men. Their experiences with women were more passionate than those with men, and felt "right" at the time. These women could legitimately be included in a history of lesbianism, as their contact with men was so clearly working against their own desires.

In several cases, however, sexual desire for both sexes was present, and neither heterosexuality nor lesbianism can be said to have predominated in the period under study. In such a case as this, a description of same-sex behaviour as "lesbian-like" serves only to erase from history a person who was at the time bisexual in behaviour, not lesbian. By this I mean that they experienced desires equally for both sexes, and could not be said to be acting sexually with men merely because that was what dominant discourse said they ought to be doing. I argue here that these women's subjectivities ought more properly to be described as bisexual.

Complicating such a tidy and clear division, however, are the testimonies of those women who had satisfying sexual relationships with men early in their lives, did not identify in any particular way before 1965, and have subsequently come out as lesbian and regard themselves always to have been lesbian, despite their earlier sexual satisfaction with and desire for men. These women, perhaps more than others, indicate why we should be very careful about linking identity labels to behaviour.

Whatever the difficulties involved in Vicinus' definition of "lesbian-like" behaviour, she does bring to us the very useful idea of the "not said" and the "not seen" as conceptual tools. Lesbian and bisexual women's history often involves dealing with the "not said"—the lack of source material discussing intimate relationships between women and the lack of identifying

labels used by them—and the “not seen”—those aspects of same-sex relationships kept out of view for reasons of propriety, fear of exposure, or concern for the sensibilities of one’s family. We must be careful not to assume that what is observed and what is visible and stated is all there is to relationships between women. Physical expressions of sexuality take various forms, including, but not restricted to, “observable” acts of penetration or genital contact. Moreover, “observability” should not be taken to refer necessarily to identity: the fact that the historical subject does not use an identifying label about herself need not indicate that she did not have a sexual subjectivity based on same-sex or both-sex desire.

Very few of the women in this study used such words as “gay,” “lesbian,” or “homosexual” about themselves before 1965. Some came to such words only after feminism and gay rights. Others never used them. They did not use any identity labels with which to explain their attractions to women, yet they clearly had a subjectivity based on those attractions and how they made them different from other women. Even though the majority of the women studied here did not call themselves “lesbian” or “gay” before 1965, most of them had an awareness of difference, of attraction to other women, and of the desire to be in relationships and communities with other women with the same desires. They must, therefore, be included in lesbian or bisexual history, for to do otherwise is to limit those histories to those women who “came out”, a rare event before feminism. What must be seen and recognized, therefore, is not an identity category, but rather a subjectivity formed on the basis of a significant commitment to a woman or to many women, coupled with a degree of intimacy going beyond friendship. That might or might not include genital intimacy.

The earliest of the sources examined in this chapter was written just after that period which Faderman has described as the “the last breath of innocence” in female-female relationships: from the turn of the century to 1920. Faderman suggests that expressions of romantic love between women, which previously could have been uttered without condemnation, were, by the 1920s, being viewed with suspicion. After 1920, Faderman suggests, the author of

such an expression would have been viewed as psychologically ill or as deserving of whatever negative consequence was meted out to her.<sup>346</sup> Faderman argues that women in twentieth-century America “had to deal with the ‘sexual implications’ of their attachments. To have disregarded them, as they could in a pre-Freudian era, would have been impossible.”<sup>347</sup> No longer was the excessively romantic, self-sacrificing hyperbole of the middle-class romantic friendship enough to disguise any physical content in a relationship between women. All such relationships could be viewed with the suspicion that they might be pathological and dangerous.

### **Hidden Languages of Desire: Reading Written Sources for Sexuality**

Women’s diaries and letters present the historian of sexuality with many difficulties of interpretation, especially if written before the Second World War. In an era in which sexuality was largely not spoken of, and in which respectable women were thought to be much less sexual than men, women naturally tended not to write about their sexual desires and behaviours. It was a rare woman indeed who breached these boundaries of appropriate expression, since the consequences for reputation could be severe. Even those literary figures whose works ventured into such areas risked being branded as salacious and improper. Little surprise, then, that the few women’s records to be found in public archives and private collections contain little or no material on the authors’ sexual activities. Acknowledgement of same-sex desires and activities was even more risky, and thus less common. These constraints render the manuscript collections discussed in this chapter particularly significant, for they allow us a rare glimpse into the erotic lives of women whose sexual desires and activities were doubly proscribed.

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<sup>346</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 297.

<sup>347</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 142.

The language of the romantic friendship continued well into the twentieth century in middle-class relationships between women, regardless of their assumed pathology. Even though, as discussed earlier, expressions of devotion between women were being viewed by some with suspicion, the linguistic form of the romantic friendship remained popular among certain groups of women into the 1940s. It was a language of the educated middle and upper classes, it was replete with expressions of adoration, loyalty, and devotion, and it often used spiritual or religious imagery in relation to emotion. Its hyperbolic nature bore considerable relation to literary expressions of heterosexual courtship and especially to very romantic poetry. I shall argue here that it began to include expressions of physical love and words clearly arising from the new sexological and psychological discourses of the twentieth century but retained its characteristic extravagance of imagery and gushing sentiment.

In the nineteenth century, such a romantic language fit well both with dominant notions of women's greater emotionality and lesser physical passion, and with middle-class assumptions about (respectable) women's greater spirituality, morality, and religious and marital devotion. In the early twentieth century, that same language was still in use among the middle and upper classes, but it had become entwined with a new, chic, sexualized discourse, partly taken from Freudian and sexological literature and partly the result of changing norms of courtship. It was still the case that young women could wax lyrical about their devotion for one another, but the mingling of more general romantic terminology with new sexualized terms such as "mashing" and "spooning" meant that romantic devotion was now much more likely to be viewed by those privy to the new theories as having a physical and thus dangerous aspect.

The relationship of Frieda Fraser and Bud Williams commenced at the cusp of two important periods in middle-class lesbian history, the era of the romantic friendship and the Freudian era. Their letters are reminiscent in their expressions of love and devotion of some of the letters of nineteenth-century lesbians such as those examined by Lillian Faderman in her work on the romantic friendship. Similar middle-class values are expressed, and the social

milieux in which they moved were middle-class in nature. Yet Bud and Frieda clearly had a physical sexuality. Their letters are much less ambiguous than those of other collections.

Both Bud and Frieda wrote extensively about feeling as if the other were physically present while they were apart, Bud in England and Europe, and Frieda in the United States and occasionally back in Canada. Bud's letters are more demonstrative in their emotional content in this regard. Feeling their separation particularly sharply, Bud wrote to Frieda in 1925,

I don't know what I think about it really - but I do know that it isn't very nice when you aren't about or I'm not feeling that you want me. There haven't been many intervals of that kind fortunately - none at all lately - but I have taken care that there shouldn't be. When I thought you were leaving me, I have screamed and kicked - which is much more effective at this distance than it ever was at close quarters! - or forced myself upon you. I don't know whether it is worth wondering about, but I do quite a lot of thinking without getting anywhere."<sup>348</sup>

A number of the letters between Frieda and Bud indicate clearly that they were in the habit of sleeping together. Several letters suggest at the very least some intimate cuddling, if not genital sexuality. In 1925, Bud wrote to Frieda,

The funniest thing has happened every night since I have been here. I have wakened up quite suddenly in the middle of the night with the feeling that you were there, and after saying 'Everything is all right, dear, and it is so nice to have you,' I've rolled over and gone to sleep again almost as if I had a piece of you to hold on to. After the first week, I began to look at the time - it has always been between 4.15 and 5.15 which is, of course, well on towards morning. And it suddenly occurred to me this morning that it would just about [be] the time you were going to bed! Isn't that odd?<sup>349</sup>

That the women may have woken each other regularly is revealed in a further letter from Bud to Frieda in 1925, in which she revealed to Frieda that "Yesterday I was awakened by two letters from you - it was nice - almost like having you waken me."<sup>350</sup> A further letter reveals that "Last

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<sup>348</sup> University of Toronto Archives (UTA) Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 4 November 1925.

<sup>349</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 23 July 1925.

night you were very close, lamb, almost touchable. And you were there just as much in the morning. It was very pleasant.”<sup>351</sup>

It was not unusual for women to sleep together in this period. That this was more than simply two friends sharing a bed is revealed in letters talking about the kinds of risky behaviours that took place when the women were asleep or just waking up. Bud was somewhat upset when she “absolutely disgraced [Frieda] on Sunday - or rather Monday at 3 a.m.” She told Frieda that “Moll came back from Paris and wakened me rather gently - I had asked her to - and I embraced her and kissed her much more violently than usual. Oh lambie, it was an awful effort not to weep and to be sufficiently interested in her doings when I woke up properly.”<sup>352</sup>

Writing to Bud about a weekend adventure with two of her friends, Frieda wrote “Tomorrow & the next day are going to be terrible without you because Helen Bryant & Anita Reinhard & I are going to spend Sunday walking in the country taking with us a hunkacheese...I am going to spend the night there & we will start bright & early on Sunday.” She then continued: “as I am going to share Helen’s ample bed I hope I don’t get absent-minded while asleep. It might be a ‘How did you get here Miss Brown?’”<sup>353</sup> During a later trip with another friend she once again worried about how she might behave while asleep: “we are having a pleasant time in each others [sic] company —at least I am and she is ceasing to be quite so polite. Some time I’m afraid I shall forget in my sleep that it isn’t you. I’m amused to notice that B is

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<sup>350</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 29 December 1925.

<sup>351</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 010, File 04, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 27 June 1926, Box 010, File 04, Fraser Family Personal Papers.

<sup>352</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 010, File 04, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 14 February 1926.

<sup>353</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds III, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 036, File 06, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 12? December 1925 (question mark in original).

disproportionately affectionate when half asleep.”<sup>354</sup> These comments show clearly that Frieda and Bud were doing much more than simply resting together,

Frieda’s letters about their closeness were often phrased in less “romantic” language than Bud’s, she being the more emotionally reserved of the two, and addressed more directly the subject of physical contact. That she and Bud shared a bed becomes clear when Frieda reveals various aspects of their sleeping arrangements. Writing about consideration between them, she protested in 1926 that

This business of your being close is really getting absurd. One night I came down from the delivery room dripping with heat & exertion at about 3 AM & began to apologise quite seriously to you for not bathing before I went back to bed. I didn’t realise what nonsense it was till I decided perhaps I had better be a little more considerate of you & get up again.<sup>355</sup>

Frieda spoke frankly of their sleeping together when she teased Bud, “Now I am in bed & yet I don’t like to try sleeping because of you. You always were a restless devil weren’t you. It is hard to explain how you can keep me awake at this distance.”<sup>356</sup> Bud’s comments on their sleeping arrangements were less frequent, but she did say in 1926 “You have evidently taught me your trick of not minding which way I face when I’m asleep - I didn’t realize it until last night and it was most pleasant.”<sup>357</sup>

Other statements made in the letters are perhaps less suggestive of physical intimacy, yet they do convey the impression of a closeness that went beyond friendship, even of the romantic

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<sup>354</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds III, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 036, File 08, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 29 April 1926.

<sup>355</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds III, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 036, File 09, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, June 1926, n.d.

<sup>356</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds III, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 036, File 11, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 5 March 1927.

<sup>357</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 010, File 05, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 24 September 1926.

kind. Frieda's comment to Bud that "It is nearly as difficult to go to sleep quickly now as any time. I might supplement your observation by reminding you that we were extremely good the last night you were in New York. This tends to prove that if at large we would be quite sensible" seems to suggest, in a flirtatious way, that the women "behaved" on an occasion that presented temptation. Her further remark that "The well known law that the attractive force between two bodies varies inversely as the square of the distance & directly as their masses doesn't seem to hold" seems directly to convey a physical attraction.<sup>358</sup> In her turn, Bud commented "Thank heaven you didn't come to Buffalo, much as I would have liked it. I would have felt so guilty about it. I'm sorry you're having sleepless nights - I wish I could be there to make them more amusing."<sup>359</sup> And more humorous than serious was Frieda's query "As to the information that you don't like being pawed. I shall make a note of it against the future. Do you mean anything?"<sup>360</sup> The following month, she reminded Bud: "My dear, I've barely one eye open though it is only nine & I just wanted to remind you as before that I'm there to hold your hand, and indeed all of you."<sup>361</sup>

While many letters between Bud and Frieda suggest that they slept together and had a physical sexual relationship, others suggest that they may not have conceived of themselves as lovers in the usual sense. Commenting on the frequency with which Frieda's letters arrived, Bud joked "My dear - Cousin Lucy would certainly think that I had a lover - three letters in two days!

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<sup>358</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds III, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 036, File 11, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, ? March 1927.

<sup>359</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 010, File 05, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 20 July 1926.

<sup>360</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds III, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 036, File 11, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 11 April 1927.

<sup>361</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds III, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 036, File 12, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 17 May 1927.

It is the nicest thing to get them when after the first I had resigned myself to another week! The last one, which reached me this morning only took seven days, isn't that quick?"<sup>362</sup> The following year, she wrote to Frieda "What a perfectly swell day, darling - 3 letters from you! I'm sure the maid thinks I have a lover."<sup>363</sup> These comments suggest that Bud did not regard Frieda as her lover, at least in the same way that she might have regarded a male partner, but they do not invalidate the argument that theirs was a physical relationship.

The extent of their passion for each other is revealed in the openness of their affection for one another. They wrote with amusement about public expressions of affection. A bemused Frieda wrote to Bud in 1925, "My dear, I nearly disgraced you about an hour ago. The train had stopped & I was thinking of nothing at all when I suddenly heard myself whisper "darling!" quite distinctly. Everything else was so quiet that if anyone had been listening they could have heard same at the end of the car. No comments were made anyway."<sup>364</sup> The potential for public embarrassment worked both ways: "My lamb," Bud wrote, "it is very hard to be sensible tonight. I'm so awfully thrilled about loving you and vice versa. If you were about, I should probably fall on your neck on the street and kiss you, and disgrace you publicly."<sup>365</sup>

Some entries suggest a familiarity with and admiration of each other's bodies. A wistful Bud wrote in 1925, "Your letters have your smell quite distinctly when I first open them - hospitably, I admit, but nice withal! Oh doesn't it sound awful?"<sup>366</sup> It would appear that Frieda

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<sup>362</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 1 August 1925.

<sup>363</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 010, File 04, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 6 February 1926.

<sup>364</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds III, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 036, File 11, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 13 January 1927.

<sup>365</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 1 December 1925.

was often around when Bud was bathing. Bud remarked: “The only bright spot in my mornings is Enid, who comes in and is rude to me because I won’t get out of my bath. The first morning she did it it reminded me so of you that I nearly wept. As a matter of fact, she isn’t a bit like you, but you’re the only person who makes a practice of being nasty to me in my bath - oh my darling, wasn’t it fun?”<sup>367</sup> And describing a theatre production of Peter Pan, she lamented, “The woman who has been doing it was ill and the new one was too much like you for my complete comfort - I’ve always said that you would make a nice Peter, haven’t I? - but her legs weren’t as nice as yours.”<sup>368</sup> Frieda seemed to appreciate the attention, commenting the following summer “As you may have gathered from my last letter Don, Alan Shinstone, Elspeth, & I went on a canoe-trip in Algonquin Park. We enjoyed ourselves immensely. I wish you could see me now—very brown very bright eyed & surprisingly well muscled. I hope a little of it stays for you.”<sup>369</sup>

The evidence discussed above suggests not only that Bud and Frieda had a physical relationship, but also that they knew consciously what that relationship meant and how it would be perceived. That they knew full well that their relationship was of the kind not approved of by society, that they knew that they had to be careful around whom they showed affection, both verbal and physical, and that their language with each other was both loving and flirtatious

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<sup>366</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 December 1925.

<sup>367</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 010, File 04, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 6 January 1926.

<sup>368</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds II, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 010, File 04, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 19 January 1926.

<sup>369</sup> UTA, Acc. No. B95-0044, sous-fonds III, Fraser Family Personal Papers, Box 036, File 12, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 3 August 1927.

demonstrates that they had lesbian subjectivities. They consciously appreciated the nature of their relationship and of their own individual sexualities.

The letters between Frieda and Bud were written only a few years after the “innocence” of the romantic friendship had been eroded. As Faderman suggests, magazine and literary representations of the romantic friendship dwindled once the new discourse of pathological sexuality held sway and relationships between women were now more readily suspected of having a genital component. But how are we to interpret the actual content of relationships between women in the period of change? In *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Faderman argues strongly that earlier relationships between women probably would not have been sexual because women of the nineteenth century were trained to be sexually passive and likely did not see themselves as sexual beings. She does not state firmly, however, that relationships between women after 1920 were sexual. In arguing so strongly for a lack of physical sexuality in the romantic friendship, Faderman implies that it was the discourse of sexuality which was responsible for sex. In other words, Faderman is suggesting that without the new views of the twentieth century—recognizing the existence of female sexuality but also defining what was and was not healthy female sexuality—sex would not have occurred between women. She is implying a direct and causative link between public discussion and behaviour.

It is certainly the case that Frieda and Bud were familiar with the new discourse on sexuality. Frieda in particular, perhaps because of her medical training, was familiar with views of relationships between women as “unnatural”. But are we to suggest that without that discourse, their relationship would not have had a physical component? If we are to agree that it was the new discourse that changed everything, then we must also be prepared to accept that suddenly, when the discourse became widespread in the 1920s, their behaviour, and possibly even their entire self-concept, changed in response to the discourse.

As already stated, the accuracy of Faderman’s claim that earlier relationships between women were not genital is challenged by such sources as *I Know My Own Heart*, which clearly

indicates that Anne Lister had not only a self-aware lesbian subjectivity but also genitally-based relationships with women in the heyday of the romantic friendship.<sup>370</sup> Also problematizing the argument Faderman makes, however, is any physical same-sex relationship between women occurring between 1869 and the 1920s, between the date of first publication of the new sexological terminology of “homosexuality” and the decade by which Faderman suggests the discourse had become hegemonic.<sup>371</sup> Faderman is assuming the hegemony of two discourses: the discourse of female sexual passivity and that of sexology. Neither discourse was entirely hegemonic, and the period of slippage between the two was long.

Even in the heyday of the discourse of female sexual passivity in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, there were those who disputed its terms. As attitudes changed, and it became increasingly acknowledged that women had sexual passions, there remained many in society who saw women’s sexuality as weaker than men’s, however, and even the twentieth-century discourse of the companionate marriage did not fully erode such views. Sexology, which came into being in the mid-nineteenth century, was not widely influential until the middle of the twentieth century. Even then, one could hardly say that its terms and methods were hegemonic. The patchy nature of public discourse on female sexuality allowed some women to maintain physical same-sex relationships without exposure even as sexology was beginning to focus attention on “sexual inversion.”

At much the same time as Frieda and Bud were writing passionately to each other during their separation, Constance (Conti) Grey was completing her education in France. The earliest record we have of Constance’s sexuality is the journal she began keeping while away from Victoria. The physical attributes of the men Conti and her friends met were discussed in some

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<sup>370</sup> Helena Whitbread, ed. *I Know My Own Heart*.

<sup>371</sup> As I have earlier acknowledged, however, the Fraser-Williams correspondence is highly unusual. Further research would have to be done to support the argument I make here, as this one collection cannot be generalized to all women of the period.

detail. Her friend “Insect” (Conti was also called “Insect” in this friendship) wrote in 1923 about her current emotional attachment, “Puggy,” that he had “dark, kinkly, coy hair, and gray eyes that are my undoing- big and well-made.”<sup>372</sup> Conti and her friends were interested in relationships with men who were respectable, clean, educated and personable but who they also found physically and sexually attractive. While being “of the right sort” was important, they also felt attracted to men who represented danger, challenge and physicality.

The discourse of respectability, limiting the social circles in which they moved and the men they were permitted or likely to meet, and maintaining that young women of their class should consider only men of a certain intellectual and moral type, restricted their choices in sexual partners. Limitations were placed on the freedom of young women so as to ensure that their respectability was not compromised. And yet, Conti and her friends did consider men in terms of their physicality, sensuality and sexual ability, which suggests that the discourse did not wholly control their thoughts or their communications with each other.

Conti was involved in romantic relationships by the time she was in France in 1923, but it is impossible to determine whether or not they were sexual. In October of that year, she seemed to be evaluating her relationship with a man she describes as “C.” In shorthand, she lamented that “C. may come over but won’t bring me. Life is just hell, but [he] sees her and takes her to places that I went to, saying that he could not take me this year. I have had no [illegible] for a month...He hardly pleased me...and I love him still.” Conti contemplated her options: “After 24 years of being taken absolute care of...to do a thing for myself the shock is very great and am a bundle of nerves and not able to think of a thing to do. I do not think that he wants me to leave him, but he wants absolute freedom of action. Am trying to end...but it is very hard.”<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Swartz, Box 13, File 2, “Insect” to Constance Grey, 29 October 1923. The origin of this shared nickname is unknown.

<sup>373</sup> Swartz, Box 1, File 1, Journal, 7 October 1923.

Little information is available concerning Constance's sexual and emotional relationships with men immediately before her engagement to Barney Box in 1926, as the journals for this period have not survived. That sexuality was important to Conti, however, and that her friends regarded her as a sexual person, is clear from the tone of a letter from her friend "Molly," who asked upon hearing of Constance's engagement "What would you like for a wedding present, by the by? In view of your love of books and other things, I suggest a complete set of the works of Marie Stopes. But no! Let's not be coarse on this happy occasion!!"<sup>374</sup> The journals do not reveal exactly how familiar Conti was with the work of Marie Stopes, the leading British advocate of contraception and fertility control. It is almost certain, however, that Conti knew of Stopes and other family limitation activists from the *British Columbia Federationist*, to which her family subscribed and to which her father wrote regularly on social issues. The campaign for family limitation was discussed regularly in the *Federationist* throughout 1923, 1924 and 1925.<sup>375</sup>

Letters from Barney Box to Conti during their marriage have not survived, so it is impossible to assess the degree of intimacy expressed between them. Occasionally, however, quoted segments in Constance's journals reveal a strong emotional intimacy. It would even be tempting to interpret the following quotation as referring to sexual practices: "30 Jan from Poo [Barney]: 'My own Twee Buggerlie...'"<sup>376</sup> Given the English fondness for the word "bugger," however, such a reference might be completely innocuous.

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<sup>374</sup> Swartz, Box 1, File 12, File 5, "Molly" to Constance Grey Swartz, 30 March 1926; emphasis added.

<sup>375</sup> Angus McLaren & Arlene Tigar McLaren, *The Bedroom and the State*, 62-63.

<sup>376</sup> Swartz, Box 1, File 3, Journal, 30 January 1931.

A year before her engagement to Barney Box, Conti had had an intimate relationship with “Patsy,” a Native cowboy she met while on a ranching vacation in the Chilcotin. Patsy wrote to Conti of his love for her, but cited race and class as barriers to that love:

Dearest Constance:

It is with a broken hart that I write this letter. I would have told you long ago only Im not worthy of your love Constance...Dearest friend as I can only call you a friend now I was going to tell you that I loved you last fall when I was in the Hospetial & then you came one night & showed me the photo of Lord Grey & said he was your Cousion Constance I could.nt tell you then. you a lady & a couision to a Lord & what was I only a cowboy & not a white man at that. dont you remember I said I was different from thoes other men well that is what I ment

the Pain in my hand was nothing to the pain that was in my hart

that was why I said the sooner I left Vancouver the better

I am doing wrong by telling now but I cant help myself if I was a white man & had went to school I would have asked you to be my wife last summer.<sup>377</sup>

The nature of Constance’s reply is not known, but it would appear that she was upset by Patsy’s letter. He wrote again in June 1925 and apologized for having hurt her feelings but reiterated that “Its just because Im not a white man you know yourself when your Dad took me to the hospital they put me in with the Chinaman.” Patsy further emphasized that “If you had married me your Dad & Ma would die with shame. even tho Im not a white man if you ever need a true friend one who will give all & ask for nothing you will know where to find one.”<sup>378</sup> It is unclear whether or not the relationship between Conti and Patsy was a physical one, but it nevertheless was intimate enough to have crossed the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable relationships between Native men and white women. Conti married Barnard Box the following year, but maintained a frequent and affectionate correspondence with Patsy for some time.

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<sup>377</sup> Swartz, Box 13, File 24, “Patsy” to Constance Grey, 12 May 1925.

<sup>378</sup> Swartz, Box 13, File 24, “Patsy” to Constance Grey, 3 June 1925.

Constance's relationships with women were equally as passionate as those with men. While in France, she had developed a close relationship with Lydie, her host. The two young women would spend long hours dancing together, Conti taking the “masculine” role. Conti suffered from sore feet, however, and on one occasion was unable to dance. “Now my foot won't let me dance,” she wrote. “I sit & impersonate a bored male at a table in a cabaret; or a lonesome, lame bachelor, pining for petting; while L. vamps me or breaks my heart!”<sup>379</sup>

Constance’s sometimes androgynous appearance was tolerated by her hosts in France. She favoured a style of dress which earned her teasing from Lydie’s family and friends about her masculinity. On one occasion she wore a “[A] navy gabardine suit; white silk blouse; P.Pan collar with black bow tie; Gooch’s Auntie Bee 3 gn. lid; gray gloves, gray stockings & Chillingham suade [sic] shoes. They kept saying I looked like a ‘bad boy’.”<sup>380</sup> The teasing did not offend her: she was to wear this costume on several subsequent occasions.

Constance’s exploration of masculinity in dress and behaviour in France and elsewhere is indicative of her transgression of normative gender roles. While her hosts in France seemed amused by her attire, it is interesting to note that she did not resent their teasing, and further that when dancing with Lydie, she would always take the masculine role. Conti was a person who loved to act and considered herself one of the avant-garde, and her occasional cross-dressing might therefore be nothing more than recreation.<sup>381</sup> It does, however, illustrate that Conti did not always feel herself to be bound by the constraints of normative femininity.

It would appear that Lydie was not the only young woman with whom Conti shared a passionate relationship while she was overseas. One month before hearing of Insect’s new love, Conti had written about her “darling Insect! I get quite lump-in-froaty [when I] think of her!

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<sup>379</sup> Swartz, Box 13, File 24, “Patsy” to Constance Grey, 3 June 1925.

<sup>380</sup> Swartz, Box 1, File 1, Journal, 20 August 1923.

<sup>381</sup> Letter, D. S. to Karen Duder, 1 March 1997.

Oohhh! Imagine when we meet again!”<sup>382</sup> And Insect, before telling Conti about “Puggy,” lamented “My most darling & wonderful Insect ...Insect I want you so- no one can ever take your place & I'm just longing to pour out things to you, it's dreadful to be so near & yet so far. I wish we could just curl up together on your bed at 1703 Leighton Rd...I think he cares & oh Insect it has never been like this before. How dreadful it seems to write it, but you said confess, & anyhow I always tell you everything just because you're Insect - my own dear priceless Insect.”<sup>383</sup>

The above quotation, in itself, need not suggest that Conti was physically passionate with “Insect,” even if the hyperbole of her language matches that of the romantic friendship, for the statement “I wish we could just curl up together on your bed at 1703 Leighton Rd” could simply refer to two girls lying about gossiping and sharing stories of their boyfriends. Such evidence must be bolstered with other material to illustrate that it should be read differently. Further evidence of Constance's passionate relationships with women comes from a letter received in May of 1925. While the journals for that year no longer exist, and no other letter remains extant to establish the identity of the author, the nickname accords with that used by a guest present at one of Constance's women's tea gatherings in 1931. The author, who signed the letter “Daffy,” wrote:

My Own Darling Sweetheart:

Just a line to say that I had to come home as Hilda is very ill and sent for me.

So you see sweetheart I had to come.

Believe me Conti Darling I love only you and wont be Happy until I am with you. But I am awfully afraid that that wont be until August when I come back from the North.

Sweetheart I cant write a long letter now I dont want anyone here to know that I am writing to you as it would cause one Hell of a fuss. I dont think that you had better write to me again until I go up North. I will write and let you know when

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<sup>382</sup> Swartz, Box 1, File 1, Journal, 1 September 1923.

<sup>383</sup> Swartz, Box 13, File 2, “Insect” to Constance Grey, 29 October 1923.

I am leaving and my address. All my love My Darling Sweetheart My Loving Sweetheart from Daffy.<sup>384</sup>

Female friends reacted with some surprise when Conti announced her engagement in 1926 to Barnard Box (nicknamed “Felix”). Conti’s friend Esther wrote “My Queen of Love-birds...Felix sounds quite the bees knees. Would I could meet him. If he succeeds in keeping you in the straight-shadow path of matrimony he’ll have proved his worth. Nevertheless if I were a he-man I’d like to be him.”<sup>385</sup> This reference to Conti’s sexuality is echoed in a letter from ‘Molly,’ who wrote

I do so rejoice over your happiness goily mine, and although all the bottom of the universe has dropped out for me (Conti, how can I let him have you?) I’m trying hard to be brave and not too selfish, and to be just glad for your sake. Only, I’m filled with misgivings too, because although your Felix sounds just too sweet, I don’t see how he can possibly be good enough for you. You are sure, aren’t you, best beloved, that you do really love him better’n all the world, and not just because he’s nice and one-of-us, and most of the other people round you aren’t?...Conti darling DARLING!! How I want you... Your Molly.<sup>386</sup>

The subject of sex was freely discussed by Conti and her friends in this early correspondence. One of Conti’s most prolific correspondents, “Goilie,” wrote in 1930 “Funny how all my girl friends seem anxious for me to have affairs with their husbands! I’m not sure I like that either: seems a left-handed sort of compliment, somehow. There’s Peggy, urging me to vamp Larry. Says she thinks it will do him good, forsooth! The trouble is, I’m not at all sure I want to just now. We all slept in the same room as usual and while Peggy was getting brekka Larry crushed into bed with me and cuddled me. I like the cuddling, but firmly suppressed the first sign Larry showed of wishing to break into rudeness. Must be losing my B.V. Maybe even

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<sup>384</sup> Swartz, Box 12, File 5, “Daffy” to Constance Grey, 2 May 1925.

<sup>385</sup> Swartz, Box 14, File 30, “Esther” to Constance Grey Swartz, 17 May 1926.

<sup>386</sup> Swartz, Box 1, File 12, File 5, “Molly” to Constance Grey Swartz, 30 March 1926.

a C-bird wouldn't be able to get me unbuttoned now."<sup>387</sup> This last reference to "C-bird" further suggests the physicality of Conti's relationships with women: "C-bird" was one of Conti's nicknames.<sup>388</sup> It is unclear when exactly Conti got Goily "unbuttoned," and to what degree.

Conti continued in her journals of 1930-32 to express her admiration for women in very physical terms, despite living in a heterosexual marriage. Her journal entry for 17 March 1931 mentions that she went to The Capitol to see "the one & only Garbo in 'Inspiration' [with] Bob Montgomery, Lewis Stone, Marjorie R. She is too lovely; too divine. I wept pitifully...couldn't bear it. Her acting is too wonderful. Goily saw it a week ago [and commented that] 'R.M. Undoubtedly has S.A. [Sex Appeal] but a weak face.' He certainly has- & how he has it!...But Greta's voice! What a woman. 100% more lovely [than] Marlene. I'd say Marlene is physical appeal; Greta more mental appeal. Anyway she's perfect."<sup>389</sup> A few days later, recalling a weekend trip to Vancouver, Conti commented on two of the women she had met: "Josephine is lovely too; very, very pretty; scarlet rouged lips & fluffy hair longbobbed behind her ears. Same with Billie...beautiful body: a really lovely girl."<sup>390</sup> The physicality of this language is not unusual for her descriptions of other women.

Conti's willingness to document her feelings about women and to retain those letters from women which suggest more than mere friendship should suggest to us that she acknowledged her attraction towards women and viewed her relationships with women as

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<sup>387</sup> Swartz, Box 1, File 2, Journal, 8 January 1930, quotation from correspondence, "Goilie" to Constance Grey, 12 December 1929.

<sup>388</sup> Swartz, Box 1, File 2, Journal, 23 February 1931: Conti referred in her journal to her husband having written of his "own C-bird sitting (or should I say roosting) in his deck chair." Conti was nicknamed "Birdie" from birth, and it would appear that a version of the nickname had remained with her into adulthood. Elliott, *Winifred Grey*, 159.

<sup>389</sup> Swartz, Box 1, File 2, Journal, 17 March 1931.

<sup>390</sup> Swartz, Box 1, File 2, Journal, 21 March 1931.

important. Had she wished to erase that part of her life from public view, she could easily have destroyed the letters and any relevant journal entries. Conti was an intelligent woman who would have realized that her possessions would have been perused by her executor after her death. She did not donate her own papers to an archival repository, so one cannot suggest that she deliberately constructed her collection for public consumption. Nevertheless, her retention of these suggestive documents reveals that they were important to her personally and that she did not worry sufficiently about their being read that she destroyed them. They were an important part of the story of who Conti was as a person.

It was with men that Conti had sexual relationships throughout much of her life. In 1946, Conti and her second husband, Ira Swartz, were divorced after a three-year separation, Ira being the plaintiff. Whether Conti had had sexual relationships between her two marriages is unknown. From the late 1940s to her old age, however, Conti had a succession of affairs with men and acquired a reputation as a “vamp.” One friend was later to describe her as having “an extremely rich animus. She almost consumed the men she knew [and there was] almost too much in her.”<sup>391</sup> Those who knew her were not surprised to hear of affairs documented in the letters she left.<sup>392</sup>

Given that Conti spent most of her life in relationships with men, it would be tempting to view her earlier relationships with women as merely an experimental phase she went through in the 1920s, a decade in which sexual experimentation became somewhat fashionable among the young middle and upper classes. Yet this would do an injustice to the depth of Conti's passion in those relationships and to the degree to which she lived her life otherwise outside heteronormativity. The journals and the correspondence reveal that Conti Swartz expressed herself passionately in language and also, I maintain, in her sexual life with both men and

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<sup>391</sup> A.B. to Richard Mackie, April 1989.

<sup>392</sup> D.S. to Richard Mackie, 1989.

women. That she married twice and bore a child does not negate the intensity of her passion for women; nor does her lifelong commitment to women negate the fact of her pleasure in relationships with men. Furthermore, there is a lack of expression of such emotions as shame, fear or regret regarding sexuality. Neither heterosexual nor lesbian desire dominates these papers. Rather, her early journals and correspondence demonstrate an aesthetic and erotic appreciation of both men and women, and suggest that she was, in fact, bisexual.<sup>393</sup>

The journals and correspondence of Conti Grey Swartz, discussed above, are replete with middle-class language not untypical of the “romantic friendship” era, even though they were written in the 1920s and 1930s, when supposedly the romantic friendship had lost its innocence. Yet they also reveal an acknowledgement of sexuality and a familiarity with some of the new literature on sexuality and birth control. These journals, and the letters of Frieda Fraser and Bud Williams, show clearly that the language of romantic friendships could co-exist quite easily with physical sexuality. They may not have addressed the physical sexuality of their authors directly, but a careful reading may reveal that a physical relationship was occurring between two women.

A further example of this combination of the language of the romantic friendship and the new terminology of the twentieth century is the correspondence between “Bunny,” a Vancouver social worker, and Elisabeth Govan:

You have all the things that would, and did, hoist you almost beyond reach of my earthly eyes...social poise, academic honours that are staggering in comparison to mine, achievement and prestige in the top drawer of social work...teaching. Even those dizzy heights couldn't deter me, or send me ricocheting away from you as they might easily have...Instead we reached out to each other from the...to be analytical about this...from the libidinal level...the warm altogether pleasure of our emotional reaction to each other.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> Constance's friend, D. S. , and a relative are in agreement with this conclusion. Letter, D. S. to Karen Duder, 1 March 1997.

<sup>394</sup> University of Toronto Archives, Acc. No. B79-0027, Box 3, File 4, Correspondence, Bunny to Elizabeth Govan, n.d. (1940s).

Elisabeth Steel Livingston Govan was born in Scotland in 1907 and immigrated to Canada with her family. She received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Toronto in 1930 and then took a second BA at Oxford, graduating in 1932. She followed that degree with a Master's in Public Welfare Administration and a Diploma in Social Work from the University of Toronto. In 1938, Govan travelled to Australia to take up a position as a casework tutor in Sydney. The following year, she was appointed to the University of Sydney, and in 1940 Govan became the director of social studies.<sup>395</sup> Govan returned to Toronto in 1945 and took up a junior position as an assistant professor. She completed her studies in 1951 with a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and then left the academic world to work on special projects for the Canadian Welfare Council. She returned to the University of Toronto in 1956 to accept a full professorship in social work.

Little is known of Govan's intimate female correspondent "Bunny." From the few letters that remain of Bunny's correspondence with Govan during the 1940s, it appears that Bunny was studying at the University of British Columbia for a degree in Public Welfare. Govan, or "Betty", as Bunny called her, had telephoned Bunny some time in 1944 or 1945. The two women may have met each other as early as 1928, when Govan was an undergraduate at the University of Toronto. After Betty had visited Bunny in Vancouver, Bunny remarked to her friend Meg, "'We picked up just where we left off...' and she immediately sensed my sense of...revelation, or something. She said...' It proved a lot of things for you, didn't it...because you have changed and grown up almost completely since 1928...?'"<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Carol Baines, "Professor Elizabeth Govan: An Outsider in Her Own Community," in *Challenging Professions: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Women's Professional Work*, eds. Elizabeth Smyth et al (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 47-48.

<sup>396</sup> UTA, Elisabeth Steel Livingston Govan Papers, B79-0027, Box 3, File 4, Bunny to Elisabeth Govan, n.d., ellipses in original.

The correspondence between Elisabeth Govan and Bunny has been examined recently by Carol Baines, who quotes the letters at length. Baines seems reluctant to call the relationship a lesbian one, however, arguing that “given the lack of definitive evidence, one can only speculate.”<sup>397</sup> While she does suggest that the early twentieth-century pathologization of lesbians “may well help us understand some of the ambivalence that Govan experienced” about her personal relationships, Baines seems to be seeking evidence of a physical relationship as proof of Govan’s sexual orientation. I argue here that the letters reveal enough about the depth, passion and intimacy of the Betty-Bunny relationship, coupled with an expressed awareness on Bunny’s part of the societal disapproval of such relationships, to place the relationship firmly outside the boundaries of acceptable heterosexuality, even if Elisabeth and Bunny did not refer to themselves as lesbians or have a genital sexual relationship.<sup>398</sup>

Arguably, while Bunny does not mention the two women sleeping together or being otherwise intimate, her use of the word “libidinal” to describe their attraction clearly indicates the presence of a sexual desire or at the very least of an awareness of Freudian explanations of the type of relationship they had.<sup>399</sup> The sentence in which it occurs follows on from a passage that can only be described as fulfilling many of the requirements of the romantic friendship. Bunny not only expresses loyalty and devotion, but also places the object of her affection clearly on a pedestal, if not in heaven itself. She describes her own eyes as “earthly” and suggests that Elisabeth’s attributes place her beyond earthly terrain.

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<sup>397</sup> Carol Baines, “Professor Elizabeth Govan: An Outsider in Her Own Community,” 60.

<sup>398</sup> The letters and the relationship are discussed in greater depth in Chapter Four.

<sup>399</sup> All uses of the word “libidinal” listed in the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* are examples of psychological discourse, most listed as occurring for the first time in 1922. Strictly speaking, the libido was thought to be any psychic energy emanating from the id, but most commonly it is regarded as a sexual force. Certainly, by the 1940s, when Bunny was writing to Elisabeth, the word “libidinal” was specifically sexual in meaning.

We see in Bunny's terminology the new bridging of the "innocent" romantic friendship and the twentieth-century acknowledgement of physical sexual desire. While Bunny regards the word "libidinal" as referring to the women's emotional reaction to each other, its use in medical discourse referred to more physical, and thus more dangerous, passions. It is possible, however, that Bunny was "queering" the notion in the sense that she was able to use the term "libidinal" about feelings between two women without internalizing the pathological interpretation of that desire which would usually have been directed at lesbians.<sup>400</sup>

This modified language of the romantic friendship continued well into the postwar era. Charlotte Whitton, Ontario social worker and politician, is perhaps the most famous of those Canadian historical figures thought to have been lesbian. Upon entry to Queen's University, Whitton had become friends with a number of women, especially in a group called the Levana Society, a women-only group whose members shared visions of their futures, wrote poetry to one another, and acted very much as a sorority. Their mentor was Professor Wilhelmina Gordon, who remained important in Whitton's life for some years after she left Queen's. Whitton maintained "passionate friendships" with several female friends in the Levana Society, particularly Mora, nicknamed "Mo," and Esther. Letters between these women were written in very passionate and romantic terms. There is also some suggestion of physical contact. In 1917, for example, Mo reminisced about their times together, stating that she missed the "always strong arms about me which used to make me feel so safe and secure."<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> It should be noted here that Freud was not as condemnatory of homosexuality as were his followers. As Jeffrey Weeks comments, "What for Freud was an abnormality of sexual object choice, that in the first place needed explanation, has since taken on the characteristics of an illness which demands curing." Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, 150-151. Freud did not believe that homosexuality per se could be cured. It was his more conservative followers who used his ideas to more devastatingly pathologize homosexuality and turn it into a social problem requiring therapeutic intervention.

<sup>401</sup> Cited in Patricia T. Rooke, "Public Figure, Private Woman: Same Sex Support Structures in the Life of Charlotte Whitton." *International Journal of Women's Studies* 6: 5 (1983), 416.

Whitton's relationships with these and other women are explored by Patricia Rooke and Rodolph Schnell, who are at pains to distance their analysis from any "taint" of homosexuality. On several occasions, they make it clear in *No Bleeding Heart* that, in their opinion, the amorous correspondence between Whitton and other women was simply a playful manifestation of close friendships, belonging "to the literary genre which emerged out of the 'romantic friendships,' which were not uncommon in an era where gender roles were clearly defined and where unsupervised heterosexual interaction and social intercourse were constrained."<sup>402</sup> But whereas Lillian Faderman and others who have discussed romantic friendships place them clearly within lesbian history, Rooke and Schnell seem to be agreeing with those who argue that lesbianism requires proof of a physical sexuality, and in the absence of certain proof of it, they discount the suggestion that Whitton was lesbian.

Mo was replaced in Whitton's affection by Margaret Grier, who was to become Whitton's *grande passion*. Rooke and Schnell quote Mo's acknowledgement of her defeat:

I must admit you are a most diplomatic bigamist and an irresistible hubby. It pleases me to think that Marg. has a similar string [referring to a necklace Charlotte had given her] and that I can wear mine in Toronto without fear of losing eyes or hair...Give my love to Margaret and tell her I esteem her in spite of her usurpation.<sup>403</sup>

Rooke and Schnell argue that the terms "hubby" and "bigamist" do not describe lesbian activity, but rather are "a carry-over of the sorority language used between 'particular' friends."<sup>404</sup> I would argue, instead, that Whitton's relationships clearly were lesbian. It is in her relationship with Grier that one sees the clearest expression of the sort of devotion that, I would argue, constitutes a lesbian subjectivity.

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<sup>402</sup> P.T. Rooke and R.L. Schnell, *No Bleeding Heart*, 32.

<sup>403</sup> Mo to CW, 10 October 1921, cited in P.T. Rooke and R.L. Schnell, *No Bleeding Heart*, 37.

<sup>404</sup> P.T. Rooke and R.L. Schnell, *No Bleeding Heart*, 37.

In 1922, Whitton and Grier moved to Ottawa. They were to live together until Grier's death in 1947.<sup>405</sup> Throughout their relationship, Charlotte Whitton referred to Margaret Grier in terms common to the romantic friendships of the nineteenth century: she wrote in words extolling Margaret's beauty, and she expressed devotion and commitment to her companion. Grier, as much as one can tell from the few letters she left behind, was equally expressive. For example, on 27 December 1915, Margaret wrote to "Lottie," saying

I must confess I am deeply, head over heels in love with you and it expresses itself in an overpowering desire to devour you beginning at your throat of course...Lottie I am going to keep your letters tied up with ribbon with my lover letters - which I haven't got yet and read them over when I am an old grey haired maid dressed in combinations of lavender and old lace as Myrtle Reid describes - when you are famous I will tell my friends how I used to enjoy kissing the famous authoress on the neck and how I have even slept in her arms.<sup>406</sup>

While there is no concrete proof of a genital relationship between Charlotte and Margaret, some information, such as the above letter, does suggest that the women slept together and shared embraces. Among girls growing up, it might be excused as an expression of friendship; in the era of Sigmund Freud and Havelock Ellis, who linked the "rise" in lesbianism to the women's movement and the prevalence of women's colleges, two such politically and socially active adult women sleeping together would almost certainly have been cause for concern. That Grier proposed to keep Lottie's letters with her "lover letters," which she had not yet received, need not indicate that she did not think of Lottie as her partner. The word "lover" was associated with male partners, and its heterosexual connotations may have caused Grier

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<sup>405</sup> Whitton's grief, and her guilt at not having been present to support Margaret in her dying days, are discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>406</sup> National Archives of Canada (NAC), MG30 E256, vol. 133, letter, Margaret Grier to Charlotte Whitton, 27 December 1915. This letter is contained in the R. M. Grier File of the collection. According to Rooke and Schnell, however, Charlotte did not meet Margaret until after she moved to Toronto in 1918.

(and, as revealed earlier in this chapter, Bud Williams) to have interpreted it as not referring to her love for another woman.<sup>407</sup>

A file of personal letters that Whitton allowed to be open to researchers only in January 1999 offers more evidence of the intimacy in their relationship than was available to Rooke and Schnell. Of particular interest in the collection is a group of letters that Whitton wrote to Grier after Grier's death in 1947. Whitton composed these as a series of volumes entitled "Molly Mugwamp Makes Believe." In the letters, the extent of her grief and her devotion to Margaret are revealed. A month after Margaret's death, Charlotte remembered fondly, "I could almost feel you brush my untidy hair back off my forehead as you would do when you passed me working at my desk at night as you would say goodnight and go down to your room."<sup>408</sup> In 1949, Charlotte wrote "You will be with me everywhere, always now. Several nights I've dreamed of you, and now you are happy, so happy we both were the other night, lying together in my big bed, joshing as we often did when we had 'breakfast in bed' on Sunday."<sup>409</sup> That Whitton enclosed the phrase "breakfast in bed" in quotation marks may or may not be significant. It is unclear whether this demarcation indicated that the phrase was code for physical intimacy or was simply in some way unusual within her parlance. It is rather the emotional content of the letters, discussed more fully in Chapter Four, that indicates that their relationship was very much akin to a marriage. That Whitton restricted access to the volume of letters may be even more significant. It indicates not only that they were, perhaps, extremely personal in the sense that they revealed her process of coming to terms with her grief, but also that they revealed the depth and the passion of her relationship with Margaret Grier.

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<sup>407</sup> Indeed, the description of lesbian partners as "lovers" was not common until the late 1970s and the 1980s, when it became, in many lesbian circles, the preferred word.

<sup>408</sup> NAC, MG30 E256, vol. 133, "Molly Mugwamp Makes Believe," vol. 1, 10 January 1948. The letters in these volumes are stained with Whitton's tears.

<sup>409</sup> NAC, MG30 E256, vol. 133, "Molly Mugwamp Makes Believe," vol. 2, 27 March 1949.

What must be remembered about these early- to mid-twentieth-century sources is that they were written in an era when, although women were speaking of sex more frequently and were at least acknowledged to have a sexuality of their own, the predominant social attitude was that it was improper to speak frankly of sexual matters, especially in relation to oneself. While a few women who were in government positions, were authors of advice literature, or were medical doctors might speak about sexuality, it was almost always about the sexuality of others. It remained inappropriate to speak of one's own sexual activities and desires. That women's letters and journals from the period should be rather enigmatic on the subject is therefore not surprising. Had the women discussed still been alive, it would have been possible to ask the kind of questions of them which would penetrate that veil of secrecy which covered female sexuality before the Second World War.

The opportunity to interview the women about their relationships and also about the ways in which their letters and journals are constructed would verify, I believe, not only that these were physical relationships, but also that it was a combination of social norms about written expression and a lack of modern terminology that make these sources enigmatic and too easily misread by a modern reader. As it is, we must learn to read sources for the linguistic clues which reveal physical relationships. They are there; it is simply that we have been used to assuming that the "not said" and the "not seen" was therefore also the "did not exist."

### **Making the Unspoken Plain: The Narrators and Sex**

Despite the fact that many of the narrators for this study were growing up in an era in Canadian history in which more information about sexuality was slowly being made available via books and magazines, and greater emphasis was being placed on sex education, they remained rather naive about the functions of the body and most particularly of the physical aspects of intimate relationships. Only a few discovered the pleasures of the body

through their experimentation with masturbation, and only some had had sexual relationships with boys or men before becoming intimate with girls or women. How, then, did they explore their sexuality as girls and as young women? How did they know “what to do”? Or did they know? And what same-sex desires or knowledge of difference were experienced by those narrators who did not explore their feelings physically?

This section explores the sexual lives of some of the narrators who explored heterosexuality before acting on their same-sex feelings, those who had very early same-sex experiences, and those who had both kinds of experience before 1965. Several narrators, most particularly Lois, Barb, Cheryl, and Reva, have very vivid memories of the first time they made love with someone of the same sex, and were able to recount in considerable detail the exact circumstances of the event, which person made the first move, and what the moves were. Many more of the narrators were able to tell me, in very personal detail, the precise nature of their sexual practices with women before 1965. Assumptions about the prudery of earlier generations will surely be laid to rest by this detailed account of lesbian love-making in the years before *The Joy of Lesbian Sex* was published. I remain astonished by and grateful for the narrators’ willingness to broach such private topics as vaginal penetration, oral sex, and dildos.

Many of the narrators spoke of the “natural” and “right” feelings they experienced in their attractions towards, and especially intimate sexual contact with, girls and women, and how ill-at-ease they felt in intimacy with boys and men. The first moments of physical realization of their same-sex desires were, for many of the narrators, crucial moments in their formation of a subjectivity based on same-sex attraction, for it was in these moments that they became aware that there was at least one other person in the world who shared their desires. While they were still aware, on at least some level, that their desires were not regarded as normal, the affirmation of forming an intimate relationship with another girl or woman was a crucial element in their awareness of a shared existence. That these moments

are, for many of the women, very well remembered or constructed is therefore not surprising, as they form an integral part of their coming out narratives.

### **Early Experiences of Heterosexuality**

The majority of the women interviewed for this study had some dating experience with boys when they were growing up. Most engaged in at least some sexual activity with boys and men, although for many it was merely the obligatory adolescent necking and petting. Thirteen out of twenty-five were married for a portion of the period under study. As discussed in Chapter Two, all the narrators were well aware when they were growing up that women were supposed to marry and have children. Many of the narrators had not heard of lesbians when they were growing up, but were aware that their own desires were different. The ideal of heterosexual matrimony was thoroughly enforced, and other options were either not discussed or were shown in a negative light. Here I briefly discuss two groups of women who had heterosexual experience before developing lesbian subjectivities: those for whom it represented conformity to heteronormativity, and for whom it was not enjoyable, and those who enjoyed their heterosexual experiences.

Among the narrators who married young and did not explore same-sex desires until she was older was Sarah, who remained married until the death of her husband, feeling that the vow she had made should be kept. She describes her physical relationship as indifferent, her husband not being a particularly sexual person himself. They remained “buddies”, however, and sex was not a source of conflict in their relationship. Sarah’s husband was not her first male lover. She had had her first physical experience in Toronto when she was nineteen. Sex never met her expectations, and she was “not particularly impressed by the result, let’s put it that way.”<sup>410</sup> Because alcohol was a factor in her first encounter, her

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<sup>410</sup> Sarah, personal interview, 5 August 1998.

memories are hazy. Sarah is sure that had she been completely sober, it would not have occurred, and she is grateful that there were no consequences. No form of contraception was used, although Sarah was aware of the existence of contraceptives because her mother had told her about them. Sarah comments that she was persuaded by her husband to sleep with him and to marry him because she liked him. “I thought, ‘this is what you do,’ you know...” During her marriage, Sarah thought “there must be something better than this,” but thought that the problem might be her fault.

Before the early 1960s, when Sarah first considered that she might be lesbian, she had thought of herself as “not liking to be a heterosexual person, but not really knowing what else to be...It wasn’t that I objected to sex. It was just that I didn’t enjoy it. Which I should have done, and I felt I should have done, but I didn’t.”<sup>411</sup> Being an avid reader, Sarah read many women’s magazines—Canadian, American and British—and was well familiar with the sorts of articles that urged women to please their husbands.

At one of the dances she attended as a young woman, Jane met her future husband. She had dated boys before, but described them as “kid’s stuff.” Jane and Jim married when she was nineteen. They were both too young and immature, and the marriage did not last long. Her husband asked for a divorce within a year. Jane accommodated his request:

I had to go to this place...I don’t think it was a lawyer. Anyway it was someone who asked me to go to a place and see him in bed with somebody else, like he set it up so that the evidence could be used. So that was ok, and it just took a few minutes and he got the divorce.<sup>412</sup>

Despite Jane’s agreement with the divorce, she felt embittered and became “sort of a party girl.” She started drinking, attending parties, and having physical but not emotional relationships with men. “I was just, I guess, angry about what families mean and, you know,

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<sup>411</sup> Sarah, personal interview, 5 August 1998.

<sup>412</sup> Jane, personal interview, 1 October 1998.

the marriage break up and that...Nothing was what it was supposed to be. You know, Cinderella and all that. So I was really acting out of spite and anger for a few years.”<sup>413</sup>

Her sexual activities included intercourse without contraception. “This was long before, I didn’t even know anything about precautions...I was lucky.” Jane knew that to become pregnant outside marriage was regarded as a grave sin. None of the girls that she knew when she was growing up had become pregnant, but Jane knew that “it was not the thing to do.” She had so little information about sex, however, that she was ignorant of the need to take precautions. Jane married for the second time in 1951. She regarded it as what she was supposed to do, and all her friends were getting married. It was during this second marriage that Jane began to explore relationships with other women.

Louise also found boys “interesting” although she “didn’t particularly like them.” She comments however, that “when you’re feeling sexy, it’s any port in a storm, although I was actually a virgin until I was twenty-one. Then I got tired of being a virgin and went to bed with a French guy who was very disconcerted when he found out that he was my first.” Her earliest knowledge about and experiences of sexuality were less than enthralling. While Louise’s father was still alive, her mother had been having an affair with a local air raid warden. Louise describes him as a “lecherous creep” who was “always feeling me up.”<sup>414</sup>

Jill went out with a number of boys as a teenager. Her friend Penny would attempt to arrange blind dates for her:

I would go out on them and say nothing. They never wanted to see me again after that, of course, and I was so relieved. It was my way of handling it. I could make myself extremely boring...then I had this fellow named Bruce who seemed to be quite pushy, and he came over, and he started to want to fondle me and stuff, and I felt really...upset over that...So I felt there was something wrong

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<sup>413</sup> Jane, personal interview, 1 October 1998.

<sup>414</sup> Louise, personal interview, 10 November 1998.

with me here at this point. I was fourteen then. And all my friends are talking about boys and talking about how good-looking they were and everything.

Jill's friends were determined to get her to date boys. She went out with a few but never became sexual with them. Jill remembered:

So I just sort of went along with it just to amuse them, but I didn't feel...and then I had this fellow named Paul when I was fifteen who really cared for me, and he was a really, really good-looking guy, and all the girls were after him, and he was after me. He had a motorbike, mister cool. And so one day I just, I knew by this time, I was fifteen and I knew by this time, and I was really telling people, so I said, 'I, I think I'm a lesbian.' I never saw him again. I wonder why....<sup>415</sup>

Jill did later marry, however, and did not explore same-sex attractions while married, having instead a sexual relationship with her husband.

Sarah, Jane, Louise and Jill had heterosexual intercourse more because it was what was expected of them than because they were genuinely attracted to men. As a consequence, sex was not as enjoyable as it might have been had they felt an attraction. Several of the narrators attempted heterosexual activity but found it not to their liking and did not venture as far as intercourse. Pat, for example, tried dating boys as a teenager, but found out quickly that it was not her scene:

Oh yeah...it felt funny. I had to pretend. I was 15, so you had to pretend like you were interested in boys. But what I would do is I had a crush on this gal [Tootsie] I used to go to school with, and she had a boyfriend, and he had a friend, so we used to double date. And he used to park the car and I'd be in the back seat, and I'd think, "oh god, I want, I want out of this." So I used to sit and watch them neck in the front seat and say that I had a stomach ache or a headache or something. Anything to get out of necking with this guy. And finally, I must have really discouraged him, because he never proceeded. But no, we used to neck a lot. In those days it was called necking. Nothing serious.<sup>416</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> Jill, personal interview, 30 May 1998.

<sup>416</sup> Pat, personal interview, 24 September 1998.

She did not find it pleasant, suggesting instead that “I would much rather have been with Tootsie necking.”

Cheryl's attempts at dating boys were failures. She remembered one night when “I guess this guy, we went to the movies and so, you know, we sat in the movies, and ah, so he put his arm around me and whatnot and then, by the time we got out of the movie, it was dark...so we went somewhere and he walked me home, and he kissed me. Well, I guess I could have sang the old Peggy Lee song, ‘Is That All There Is?’ because, you know...it didn’t do a thing for me.”<sup>417</sup>

Chris, who was born and raised in Québec, did not have sexual experiences with women before 1965 but knew that she was different and knew that her responses to boys were not the same as other girls’ responses. She remembers feeling about the kissing and cuddling with boys that it “Wasn’t right, but I didn’t know what I was feeling wasn’t right...That was all I knew...It was uncomfortable...I lived with it and carried on.”<sup>418</sup> Here Chris is addressing a common theme in many lesbians’ life stories: the feeling that heterosexual relationships were not what felt “right” and natural to her. Lesbian subjectivities are often formed early in relation to heterosexual experiences in which the lesbian becomes aware that she does not enjoy the physical contact with boys and young men so sought after and enjoyed by her female peers. She may realize that her attraction is to women, or she may simply know at a very deep level that she is not attracted to men.

Some of the narrators, however, experienced heterosexual sexuality as pleasurable and found their male partners attractive at the time. Reva, for example, was allowed to date boys from a young age and enjoyed doing so. Her mother set some parameters on her dating, however. “My mother gave me dire warnings,” Reva said.

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<sup>417</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

<sup>418</sup> Chris, personal interview, 22 September 1998.

She said ‘don’t let the boys touch your breasts. It’ll make them sag.’ So this was a little piece of advice...she would always be awake waiting for me when I came through the door. She’d be right there saying ‘I’ve been waiting for you to come home, now I can go to sleep.’ She worried about me.”<sup>419</sup>

Reva’s physical affection with boys would never go far. “I was still a virgin. The person I lost my virginity with was my husband.”

Reva’s sexual life with her husband was satisfying: “I liked men, yep. It was never the sex that was the problem for me, it was the emotional connection...It really had nothing to do with sex, although I prefer being sexual with women...That was ok, it was an ok part of our marriage.” Reva commented: “my mother told me that you had to please your husband. I think we all got that message, that it was men that had to be pleased. Who cared if you were pleased as long as they were pleased, you know...it was always for him, it was never for her. We sort of didn’t count all that much.” She acknowledged that her husband had attempted to give her pleasure, but thought that “just generally in the broader culture that’s, um, the understanding was that we were there to serve our guys, and that they needed it. We didn’t need it, but when they needed it, we’d bloody well better be there, you know, or else.”<sup>420</sup>

Reva’s husband, apparently, was rather predictable: “I always knew Saturday afternoon we were going to have sex because that’s what he did Saturday afternoon. Came home for his break, and, you know...that was definitely the one day in the week that we were going to.” Despite this predictability, however, she regarded him as enlightened and remembered that “we had showers together, and he knew a lot about my anatomy, and he was a good lover.” Nevertheless, Reva knew that the broader society held her role to be that of pleasing her man and that, if she did not, there could be consequences: “I knew that I had to please him, or he’d go find another woman. As it was, I found another woman.”<sup>421</sup> Because Reva found men attractive and

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<sup>419</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

<sup>420</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

<sup>421</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

enjoyed sexual activity with them in this period, it would be more accurate to describe her as bisexual than as lesbian. While in some ways she did conform to heteronormative expectations of sexual availability to her husband, she also found sex with him pleasurable.

Magda, who began her sexual life with a same-sex relationship discussed later in this chapter, was later to get married and have children. She reported that her sexual relationship with her husband was a satisfying one. “We were companions, we were buddies, we were lovers, we were confidants,” she said.

Many times, we would lie awake all night long and talk about nothing, and um make love, whatever. It was a very satisfying relationship I had with him. But I think that was certainly due to my mental...the way I did that was to make sure that when I walked down that aisle, because that was a very significant thing in my life, that walk down that aisle. It meant more to me than just getting married. It meant that I would be sharing that person’s feelings and his life, and if I was going to do that, then I would have to devote myself to that, not to that man particularly, but to that situation. And I think that’s the reason why everything was so satisfying in my life, or in my marriage.<sup>422</sup>

Never during her marriage was she attracted to another woman: “And I find that extraordinary, I really do, because I am so very much a homosexual. Very much. More now, of course, that I’ve outed myself, but, um, I often wonder if I were still married to [him] if I wouldn’t have been attracted to women. But certainly not in those eleven years was I at all.”

There is a tension here between Magda’s later subjectivity and that during her early life and marriage. Her description of herself as “very much a homosexual” suggests that she regards sexual orientation as an essential part of her being, yet her desires changed fundamentally from same-sex ones to opposite-sex ones, and back again. It may be that Magda was more traumatized by her first female partner suddenly getting married without warning her than Magda realizes, and that feelings of rejection and betrayal caused her to repress her desires for women during her marriage. It is just as likely, however, that Magda, raised with the ideal of heterosexual matrimony and with the value of fidelity, chose the path most travelled by the

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<sup>422</sup> Magda, personal interview, 29 September 1998.

women she knew and that her subjectivity shifted after her marriage. There is no sense in her testimony that she found heterosexual sex repugnant.

Many of these women were fully sexually intimate with men, not objecting to heterosexual activity, but not necessarily being fully satisfied either. Even Reva and Magda, whose sexual relationships with their husbands were perhaps the most satisfying, feel that making love with another woman is a deeper and more satisfying experience than heterosexual sex. For some of the narrators, heterosexual sex has never been something thought appealing.

The norms with which these narrators were raised, examined more closely in the previous chapter, dictated that they should be attracted to and marry men, and many, thinking that this was what they were supposed to do, at least attempted to live the “normal” Canadian life until their developing desires proved too strong for them to continue, or until circumstances had changed in their personal lives, allowing them to explore same-sex attractions. That they stayed in heterosexual marriages for lengthy periods of time should not, however, be regarded necessarily as conformity alone. Many of the narrators, after all, had rewarding relationships with their husbands, even if those relationships were not as fulfilling as later ones with women would be. Some, such as Jane, for whom marriage was a largely negative experience, do see such periods of heteronormativity as an obstacle which had to be overcome in order to fulfil a lesbian “destiny,” but others do not regret their relationships with their husbands. Mention is made here of the positive aspects of these relationships because to fail to acknowledge them would be a churlish negation of a formative part of these women’s lives.

### **Early Same-Sex Relationships**

The narrators’ first encounters with lesbian sexuality reveal a multiplicity of experiences. It would seem that some lesbians were influenced in their early exploration of sexuality by the images they saw in films and read in books, but these were largely heterosexual images. The

films to which young women would go would feature heterosexual romances, and it was up to the young lesbian or bisexual woman to adopt a perverse reading of the images so as to fit them with their own desires. In some cases, as I have mentioned in Chapter Two, the level of identification with characters was based on gender lines rather than sexuality. Both Barb and Cheryl expressed an identification with the male characters in westerns, but only in Barb's case, discussed below, can a link be seen between a gender identification with "gentlemanly" behaviour and the first sexual experience.

In most cases, the narrators simply experimented with sexual practices or did "what came naturally." They either extrapolated from their knowledge of heterosexuality or, as Sheila Jeffreys would put it, they "discover[ed] the interesting sensations attendant on genital friction and explore[d] the possibility of improving on the sensations."<sup>423</sup> In the early and mid twentieth century, there were a sufficient number of images of heterosexual couples kissing, hugging closely, and even necking that adolescent curiosity would have led these young women to explore such behaviours, just as it did heterosexual teenagers. Once they discovered sexual pleasure, improving on the sensations took only a willingness to experiment and a little time. What these women were doing was not, of course, what the rest of society regarded as "natural," but to the narrators kissing and necking led inexorably, as it often did for heterosexuals, to "petting" and then to genital contact.

The early relationships discussed below suggest that courtship was no more a factor for teenage lesbians than it was for teenage heterosexuals. They did not court in the traditional sense, but rather explored physical sexuality fairly quickly. Some of the advice literature available for heterosexual teens addressed the subject of courtship, but it is difficult to determine the degree to which teens were inclined to follow courtship rituals rather than following their hormones and burgeoning sexuality. The elements of courtship in the 1950s and 1960s—

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<sup>423</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, "Does It Matter If They Did It?," 27.

particularly the flowers, especially roses, romantic dinners, and outings to the cinema—were perhaps more common among slightly older people. Most teens had limited financial resources and socialized at parties and dances. Those who had the use of that symbol both of postwar prosperity and youthful sexuality, the automobile, were able to explore physical sexuality away from the watchful eyes of parents, but this can hardly be called courtship. The cinema did provide many a teen in this era with a place for necking.

What must be remembered is that none of these sites of heterosexual exploration and socializing were suitable for those exploring same-sex desires. There were no teen parties or dances at which the narrators could openly express their sexuality. They could not neck in the cinema without fear of being seen, and none of them had use of a car until later in life. They therefore had to make use of the few social opportunities that were available to them, such as sleepovers, baby-sitting, and school. It was not, therefore, possible either to court or to date in the traditional sense.

Few of the narrators could remember specific courtship rituals that they employed or specific instances in which they were courted by someone else. With their very first relationships, one gets the impression that physical desire and uncertainty undermined any tendency to “go slow,” and certainly those women who had their first sexual experiences in their teens would not have been familiar enough with the courtship rituals of heterosexuality to employ them with any memorable finesse. Later in life, lesbians employed many of the same courtship devices as did heterosexuals. Some of these practices required discretionary income, however, and courtship was not necessarily a high priority among those who could ill afford the luxuries associated with it.

Reva argues that, in the 1950s, “the courtship was ever more important than the actual final act, and I think the lesbian novels dealt a lot with the courtship, you know, with getting there...Courtship was very major part. I think we’ve lost, actually, some of that, in our quicker paced, let’s get to it modern world. I think we’ve lost that courtship thing a little bit. But I think

the courtship was as important as the act.”<sup>424</sup> I reminded Reva of the compressed nature of the vignette in *Forbidden Love*, in which the young lesbian from the country arrives in town, she goes to the bar, the older woman makes an approach, and later that evening they are in bed together. I asked Reva if she thought that the story was very fictional, or if she had actually seen things happening that quickly. She acknowledged that often women “go to the bar and they wait to the end of the evening, and they say ‘my place or yours?’ and go home and go to bed. I don’t know. I’ve never done that, but I know that I’ve known women who’ve done that, and they’ve told me that’s how they do it, that they just want to be sexual, they just wait till the evening and the bar kind of plays itself out and whoever’s left...”<sup>425</sup>

Barb's first relationship was with a fellow high school student, with whom she used to go babysitting:

every night that she went to babysit she’d often ask me if I’d come and sit with her. So I did, lots of times, and then one night we were there and it happened...I remember, um, meeting her the next morning and she was just fine about it, and I thought well, now, we’re in love, so I have to carry her books to school and do all this stuff. So, this went on for quite some time. I thought this was the way I should be doing and then, um, it went on for probably, oh, we went away on weekends or she’d come to my house, or I’d go to her house, you know. That lasted a good year and a bit, I’d say.<sup>426</sup>

It was Barb who initiated this relationship, following a very heterosexual pattern of behaviour that she might well have seen played out on the screen or between other young people. Barb remembers that it was she who made the first move:

And the music was playing softly, and she was sitting next to...I think it was a lamp on an end table...and I reached over behind her and I flicked off the light, and I kept my arm around her and I just grabbed her and kissed her and kissed her and kissed her, on and on. And hugged. And that’s the way we were for the

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<sup>424</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

<sup>425</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

<sup>426</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

whole of the evening...and she didn't back away or pull away. I thought, oh well, she was just as into it as I was. So, that was the first. And then after that, of course, I got more intimate with her. After the first kiss...And then we used to, back and forth, to our homes. She would come and stay a Saturday night and we'd be going to a show or something, and I'd go over to her house and stay.

The girls then became more intimate, and Barb's recollection of their love-making suggests that she already knew what it was she wanted to do, albeit subconsciously. Her testimony also reflects the dominant norms of heterosexual courtship:

And then we got more intimate with touching the rest of our bodies...It just was a natural feeling. Like, I knew how to do it, you know? I just reached, and that's why I turned off the light. Oh, I don't know why the light off, except that was supposed to be romantical [sic]. Romance. You know, the music was playing [and the light] should be dim or off, and we should be cuddling and kissing and hugging. So that's what we did. For quite some time on the chesterfield. We just kept back and forth kissing each other and hugging and squeezing. I was touching up top and, you know, but that was the way it started. The feelings that it gave me were really, whew! Explosive, you know, inside. Yeah, really, like it was supposed to be.<sup>427</sup>

In 1956, at the age of fifteen, Cheryl had her first lesbian experience with a co-worker who was five years older. Against the wishes of her father, who was very strict, she stayed in town after work one night to attend a party. "Somebody had booze," she remembered. "Rum. The demon rum. And I was still a pretty tender age, and so I hadn't had any rum or anything like that before, so rum and coke." Around three o'clock in the morning, the other girls decided that they need to get a hamburger from the all-night diner. But one of the girls, Robyn, wanted to remain behind with Cheryl. They were drinking heavily and lying on the double bed:

So, I was kind of laying back there, you know, as the world turned, and she was laying next to me. And then all of a sudden she sort of lifted herself up on one arm, and her face was just right next to mine, and she announced that she was going to kiss me. And being the smart-ass that I was, I said "so what are you waiting for?" And she kissed me. Oh, my God, this is alright. This never happened when I kissed that boy, or that boy kissed me, you know? Shit. It didn't taste good like this, you know what I mean. Oh my god, all these things started waking up inside of me...so we had this little sort of necking session....

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<sup>427</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

At this point, Cheryl and Robyn heard the other girls come back. They quickly settled down for the night as all had work the next morning. The girl with whom Cheryl was supposed to have shared the double bed offered her place instead to Robyn, who was pretending to fall asleep beside Cheryl:

So, there we were. Then Robyn was all over me. She was kissing me, and oh my god, I just, I didn't know what to think. And I mean, I wanted her to do this, but I didn't want three other people in the room with us. So I was sure that they could hear us, because my heart was pounding so much that I'm sure they could have heard it across the room, and everywhere else was pounding. You know, throb, throb. I was sure they, oh my god what a position to be in! Oh, jeez, finally, finally, we fell asleep, and the thing is, you know, she started, at one point, she started running her hands all over my body like an octopus. Well, we were wearing pyjamas. And she put her hand up underneath my pyjama top and started playing with my breasts and, oh!<sup>428</sup>

Eventually Cheryl and Robyn fell asleep. The next morning, all five girls decided to go out for breakfast. Cheryl said,

And I get up and went to the washroom, and all of a sudden there was a tap, tap. It was one of these single little washrooms, you know, and tap, tap, tap on the door. I mean, it was nothing for two girls to go off to the washroom together, you know, one sort of sitting on the toilet and the other one's sitting on the sink, and yakking to one another, and one's putting her lipstick on or whatever. So tap, tap, tap, so I open the door, and here it was Robyn. She comes in and pulls the door closed and she said, "Do you remember what we did last night?" So all of a sudden I got all aggressive, well not aggressive, but, "well of course I remember." So I took her in my arms and kissed her. I said "This is what we did." So...we started to see one another, just like we were dating like a boy and a girl were dating.<sup>429</sup>

Despite Cheryl's early attraction towards more masculine role models, such as the gentlemanly Sir Walter Raleigh, she was not the initiator in this first sexual relationship. Robyn's age and greater experience in this instance was more forceful than Cheryl's desire to

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<sup>428</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

<sup>429</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

look after women and take charge of situations, and she was initially passive, although quickly responsive to Robyn's advances. They quickly realized that they could not maintain a lesbian relationship in secret in a place like Sydney, Nova Scotia, so they moved to Ontario when Cheryl was sixteen or seventeen years of age.

Magda's story is unusual in that she had her first lesbian experience with her teacher in 1949 or 1950, when Magda was sixteen. Magda already knew that she was "different". Her teacher

had a room in the minister's, the Baptist minister, whose daughter happened to be my friend, and there was no hanky panky. We was just very good friends. And Marion, of course, had asked me down to her place in the evening, and of course Gladys would be there. We would be playing games and things and Gladys was, I guess the term now would be coming on to me, although she did it very discreetly, and very politely. But I became very attracted to her, she was a very, very attractive lady, and the first thing I knew she would be coming around in class and stopping by my desk, you know, and, um, and any time she could she would touch me in some way. And this all felt very wonderful, but it, she did it discreetly so nobody really knew. None of my closest friends even knew. Nobody, even to this day nobody ever knew about it, except Marion. She knew that Gladys and I started to see each other and she never said a word.<sup>430</sup>

One night, when Magda was staying in town with her brother, she and Gladys began their relationship:

I walked her home and she said would I like to come in. And I said ok, so I went in, and by this time I was anxious to be alone with her, but I didn't know why. I mean, I didn't know that this was going to be a sexual thing, I just thought this was going to be a real close, very close, um, friendship...Anyway, we got up to the room, and I, she was reading poetry or doing something or other, I don't know what it was, but I was laying on the bed and I fell asleep. And the next thing I knew, I was in bed and she was kissing me and fondling me, and it just felt so wonderful. So the first thing we knew, we were into a full-blown relationship, which lasted, um, I think I was about twenty-one when she suddenly sent me out an invitation to her wedding, [and] I didn't even know she was going to get married.<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> Magda, personal interview, 29 September 1998.

<sup>431</sup> Magda, personal interview, 29 September 1998.

From the beginning, theirs was a very satisfying sexual relationship. It was “perfect, just perfect. It was like as if it was made for us, and that’s why it always felt so good. The term that people use it quite freely, I never heard it, but we did fit well together. We complemented each other.” Because Magda’s parents lived up north and she was staying with her brother, and because no-one suspected the nature of their relationship, Magda and Gladys were able to spend most weekends together.

Pam was also first attracted to a woman when she was in her teens. A family member’s son had had to go to the Korean war, and “his mother asked me to sort of entertain [his wife], pay some attention to his wife. She was about seven years older than me. So I paid a great deal of attention to her, since she was quite gorgeous and we had some wonderful moments that I thought ‘oh, this is not right, and this is not happening’...I think that’s when I knew something was a little strange with me.” The relationship involved kissing and some touching, but nothing further. The woman left for Toronto but wrote several times to Pam in Nova Scotia, urging her to follow. Upon arrival in Toronto, however, Pam discovered that the woman was no longer interested in a romantic relationship. Pam was not to have another relationship until 1955, when she was nineteen:

I went to meet a friend at a bowling alley and, ah, then went out for a beer afterwards. Saw a young woman who was at that time, were almost unheard of, manager of [a utility company], and pretty sharp gal that obviously wanted to drive me home. Did, asked me if I wanted to go out for dinner another evening. I said “yes” and that was the beginning of a thirteen-year relationship.<sup>432</sup>

Lois, whose story is told in the film *Forbidden Love*, said that she has never made the first move with a woman:

I’m so, I would never make the first move. I told you, I never have. I’ve always been damn sure that anytime I did anything the woman wanted it. I don’t know what that is, the reason for that I can’t tell you. But we hugged each other, and I

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<sup>432</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998.

really wanted to kiss her [her first lover] but you know I couldn't, I'm just not the type.<sup>433</sup>

Her first partner was another teacher, whose name also happened to be Lois. "That was after I finished...college," she said, "and I was, I was going to school. I was teaching high school...Ah, we just looked at each other and that was that. Love at first sight, I guess." They became attracted to each other, but nothing happened initially. The other Lois left:

she was going to this other teacher's up the island [Vancouver Island]. So from Cultus Lake when I got there, I wrote a letter and in the letter I said, why didn't you kiss me, you know. A few days later I got a wire: Arriving in Chilliwack, such and such a time. Meet me. Well, ok, I met her, well you can just imagine. We spent a few days at Cultus Lake. I tell you I can remember just about every detail. But we still didn't make love, I guess is the way you want to put it. Because we didn't know what to do. Oh, am I supposed to tell you all these details?...Well, I guess we did and I guess we didn't.

The two women "necked madly" for four days but did not go further. When her partner left, Lois went with her on the train as far as Jasper. They shared a berth.

So she made love to me. It was marvellous. And then I said, 'want me to do that to you?' So she started to cry. She said, 'oh boy she said, were you ever inhibited.' All of a sudden I felt better. That's what I am, I'm a lesbian!<sup>434</sup>

In this testimony, Lois illustrates a common theme in lesbian coming out narratives: the intimate moment of realization of simultaneous difference, identity, pleasure, companionship, and selfhood based on sexual orientation. It was not that her marriage had been bad, nor that her prior sexual experience had been painful or lacking in pleasure. Her narrative conveys the impression that it was that in that moment she recognized a part of herself that had not been fully realized and she experienced a level of intimacy which, however good her marriage, she had not experienced before. It is reasonably unlikely that a lesbian identity suddenly formed in the brief

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<sup>433</sup> Lois, personal interview, 3 October 1998.

<sup>434</sup> Lois, LMH interview, 26 September 1985.

moments after a single episode of love-making. Rather, the expression “I’m a lesbian” is a narrative indicator of that event having been a crucial one in the formation of her subjectivity.

Sandra became attracted to women in 1948, when she was a teenager: “It would probably be when, how old was I when I went to Normal School? See I started to teach when I was 18, so let’s say 17. And I’ve only had really two in my whole life, and one was with a girl who I got to know through the softball, and very attractive, very attractive girl.” Neither was sure of their sexuality: “And I’m not too sure she knew she was gay at the time. I don’t think I did either, but anyway. Very attractive, very popular, very, you know, everything. From a background similar to mine but she lived in Vancouver, and I lived in New Westminster.” The relationship was a physical one, and lasted five years, but Sandra could not remember who made the first move or what they did.<sup>435</sup>

Louise, who immigrated to Canada in 1953 at the age of twenty-six, had known that she was different since childhood but had not had a sexual relationship with a woman until after she had arrived here from England. She commented that “It was a really weird life, ‘cause you’re not fish nor fowl, and you know, people can’t figure you out, because you, you know, you’re a real loner, and, ah, it was a really difficult life. Because I really didn’t know what I was....” She had not been able to acknowledge until this point that she was gay, and it did not become clear to her until she became “quite friendly and fooled around a bit” with a married colleague. The colleague was fearful of what they were doing, and before Louise could successfully persuade her that it was not unnatural, the woman fell down a set of stairs, injuring herself severely, at which point the relationship petered out.<sup>436</sup>

Deborah’s first relationship was with a fellow schoolmate in her boarding school in South Africa. They shared a dormitory with several other girls, and made love at night when

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<sup>435</sup> Sandra, personal interview, 25 May 1998.

<sup>436</sup> Louise, personal interview, 10 November 1998.

supposedly everyone was asleep. I suggested to her that they must have been reasonably quiet.

“I don’t know,” she said, and expanded

God help us...God Almighty, I’m sure everybody was aware of it. I didn’t even think it was worthwhile thinking about it. I mean, this is what I wanted to do, right, I’m doing this. I didn’t even think if you don’t like this...Egotistical to the extreme, I suppose. Um, it just seemed to me an ordinary thing to do, so I’m doing this.<sup>437</sup>

Deborah believes that the school knew of the relationship, and that she paid the consequences, since she did not become the head girl:

I should have been one of those people, you know, in those girls’ school stories that was head girl of the school and all that sort of stuff, because I was in ninety thousand sports teams and all that sort of stuff, and I fully expected to be, and...I got to be vice head of the school, and I’m damned sure that this was because this was a known thing, but they couldn’t prove anything.<sup>438</sup>

Had they been able to prove the relationship, she might have been expelled.

Deborah’s next relationship was with a woman with whom she went travelling. She remembered that she

went to England and met up with three women to travel with, to Europe with, one of which was Canadian, and it was one of those instantaneous, you know, across a crowded room things. It was just fantastic. And the four of us travelled together for six, eight months in Europe, um, but it was still constant pretence. She was seven years older than I was and it was a physical relationship, but it was constantly kept hidden from the other two. She went back to Canada and some months afterwards I followed.<sup>439</sup>

In 1959, they were in Canada together and the relationship continued, but it was not an equal and honest one. Deborah stated that “We were very, very much in love, but she would continue to go out with men, because that was what, the thing you had to do. I was only, I had turned twenty-

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<sup>437</sup> Deborah, personal interview, 29 September 1998.

<sup>438</sup> Deborah, personal interview, 29 September 1998.

<sup>439</sup> Deborah, personal interview, 29 September 1998.

one in Europe, she was twenty-seven. I believed she was right, and I attempted to do the same thing.”<sup>440</sup> The pressure of heteronormativity caused Deborah to have several relationships with men before eventually she came out as a lesbian.

Reva became attracted towards women in her twenties. Reva’s “discovery” of her lesbianism has been made famous by the film *Forbidden Love*.<sup>441</sup> Reva (hereafter Reva H.) was living with her husband, and her partner (also called Reva) lived with her parents. They met at night school in 1958 or thereabouts. The story of the two Revas becoming lovers is well known. Reva reminded me of the events she had described in *Forbidden Love*. Her future partner was an avid reader of lesbian pulp novels, and had started giving them to Reva H. to read. She also told Reva H. that she thought that she was “like that.” Reva began to read more and more of the pulp novels. Eventually, Reva H. began to think that she might be “like that” herself. They quickly formed a relationship after Reva H. had separated from her husband. Reva was careful not to begin the relationship until after the separation.

The novels that one Reva gave to the other were part of a very successful genre that appeared in the 1940s as part of the “paperback revolution” in publishing. In 1941, Pocket Books moved into paperback publishing, greatly expanding its distribution and sales. A great number of paperback novels were published, including some very popular lesbian ones. The most notable of these were *Women’s Barracks*, by Tereska Torres, published in 1950, which by 1968 had sold over one million copies; *The Price of Salt* by Claire Morgan, 1952, which sold one million by 1963; and the *Beebo Brinker* series by Ann Bannon, published between 1957 and 1962. Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness* also became very popular in paperback reprint, selling over 100,000 copies annually.<sup>442</sup> Lesbians were starved for role

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<sup>440</sup> Deborah, personal interview, 29 September 1998.

<sup>441</sup> *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*.

<sup>442</sup> Yvonne Keller, “Pulp Politics: Strategies of Vision in Lesbian Pulp Novels, 1955-1965,” in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (New York & London: Routledge, 1999), 2-3.

models and, although the stories usually ended badly, the lesbian pulp novels provided women with a sense that there were others like themselves. Lesbians gave the books a “queer” reading: “They did the only thing they could - they compromised and turned a blind eye, so to speak, to the homophobic looking relations installed in these texts.”<sup>443</sup>

Reva and Lois were the only women among the narrators to have read lesbian pulp novels during the period under study, and none of the narrators could remember having read anything specific about lesbians in such publications as *Chatelaine* and *Maclean's*. While the novels clearly helped Reva to formulate a sense of who she was, the same source material was not available to others in this group. They had, instead, to adopt or adapt heterosexual norms to fit their own experiences. For many, heterosexual experimentation at least provided some experience with dating and necking. There were some narrators, however, who had neither succumbed to heterosexual peer pressure nor were bisexual, and had no experience of opposite-sex relationships before they embarked on same-sex ones.

Phyl remembers that she did not have a boyfriend when she was growing up, and nor did she have any interest in boys. She was seven or eight when she first experienced an attraction to another girl. She would get crushes on girls at school and would be disappointed when they would not respond to her invitations. “I can remember that right up into high school until I was about twelve,” she said, “and then I smartened up. I still thought about them, and I still was attracted to them, but I can’t see any of these people were ever gay. I’m sure they weren’t, but, however, didn’t stop me lookin’. It still doesn’t stop me looking...And I hung around with girlfriends at school.”<sup>444</sup> She was too shy as a child to attempt anything physical with anyone.

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<sup>443</sup> Yvonne Keller, “Pulp Politics,” 3. The construction of lesbian stereotypes in fiction is discussed in Sherrie A. Innes, *The Lesbian Menace*.

<sup>444</sup> Phyl, personal interview, 28 September 1998.

Phyl did not have a romantic relationship of any kind before immigrating to Canada in 1959. She settled in Toronto and found a job at a local factory, where she was to meet her future partner. I asked her if the women in the factory talked about sex at all. She replied, “They did, but certainly not my side of sex at all.” Despite the fact that she had heard some conversation about sex between her mother and aunt, the frank discussion of sex was new to her: “I had never heard, sex was not discussed when I was growing up, in my family anyway. It really wasn’t. It probably wouldn’t be now, really.”<sup>445</sup>

Phyl met her future partner on her first day of work at the factory. She was nineteen. “I was kind of scared to work there,” she said,

because I was so shy and I’m not good at meeting new people normally. I looked up and I remember seeing this woman down there and she had what they called a smock on, like, you know, an overall...A green one, and most people wore blue. She had a green one on. I remember seeing her there and I don’t know what I thought about her, but I wondered what she was doing there. Why would she be here, in this factory? Why would she be here? Doesn’t look like she belonged there at all.<sup>446</sup>

There was “just something about her” that made the woman stand out to Phyl:

She didn’t seem to be the type that should be in a factory there, which is kind of strange because she’s always worked in a factory, but she didn’t seem the type of person that should be there, she should be something higher. Higher than that. Yes, she attracted me from the instant I saw her. And she was nine years older than me. She wasn’t married.<sup>447</sup>

Phyl, in a self-deprecating manner, said that she did not know why the woman was attracted to her, and put it down to her English background. The woman’s stepfather was English.

Phyl knew immediately that they would be more than friends. “Looking back on it now, it was so great that somebody else felt the same way as I did, “ she remarked, “but at the time I

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<sup>445</sup> Phyl, personal interview, 28 September 1998.

<sup>446</sup> Phyl, personal interview, 28 September 1998.

<sup>447</sup> Phyl, personal interview, 28 September 1998.

just assumed that that was the way, and yet that had never happened to me before. But I just, it was just, yeah. That was just it. This is going to be.” It was only a few weeks before the two women formed a relationship, and within two months it had become physical. It is apparent that, despite not having had prior same-sex experiences, Phyl had enough subconscious awareness of her orientation and enough of a burgeoning lesbian subjectivity that she was able to recognize the mutual attraction immediately. Her testimony here also illustrates the feeling of affirmation attendant upon a first same-sex relationship.

Maureen began her sexual life with a school friend in Alberta in 1948. “When I was ten,” she said,

[my] friend Carol, I somehow persuaded her that, you know, a bit of experimentation and cuddling - I guess I was so desperate for touch of any kind. So I’m not sure if this would have happened had I not been so desperate for touch. But I remember some cuddling and then, you know, the sleepover at those years. But I guess she did go home and tell her mother something about that, and that’s when it was forbidden that I even speak to Carol, let alone ever have her over or even be a friend. So Carol was out of my life.<sup>448</sup>

When Carol told her mother, she contacted Maureen directly. “It might have been because it was so hard to reach either one of my parents,” Maureen surmised, “or because, I don’t think they’d even met my parents. They just knew that this wasn’t a usual family. So I had a call from Carol’s mother, not with any explanation, just saying, ‘for good reason, I don’t wish you to speak with Carol again and she most certainly cannot stay at your house, and I’d prefer you ignore her at school also.’”<sup>449</sup> Maureen’s family moved two months later because of her father’s employment, and she did not see Carol again.

With Maureen’s new friend Marilyn, who lived across the street in their new town, there was some sexual experimentation, “but always under the guise of - because she’s totally

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<sup>448</sup> Maureen, personal interview, 29 May 1998.

<sup>449</sup> Maureen, personal interview, 29 May 1998.

heterosexual - 'now what would this feel like?' and 'what do you think it will be like when...?'" Marilyn's family would rent a summer cottage at a nearby lake and would invite Maureen to stay with them. "I know her family felt sorry for me," Maureen said, "and strongly disapproved that there was rarely an adult, let alone a mother in my home, and that I was there alone nine tenths of the time if I weren't at school, and so they would invite me to come along. Well, the way the summer cottage was set up, I shared a bed and a room with Marilyn for a week, and that went on several summers in my teens."<sup>450</sup>

Sexual activity occurred, on and off, throughout their early teens: "She permitted a bit of it, and once, when we were in our forties, talked about it a bit. She said, 'you know, if you weren't such a strong personality, I never would have let that happen, but at the time it seemed sort of ok.'" By the time Maureen reached her mid-teens, she was working in the summers and would no longer accompany Marilyn to the lake. Marilyn also met and began dating her future husband at this time, and her relationship with Maureen became non-sexual.

Mary was raised in Britain and immigrated to Canada in 1951. She had her first sexual experience with a woman in England while she was training as a nurse. "And when I think of the things we did then," she said, "I could cringe. In front of all these, we didn't have any shame, and we didn't even do anything wrong. We'd just sit in the nurses' living room in the afternoon when we were off duty and we'd sit with our arms around each other. Never thought of anything. Or we'd, you know, somebody'd be playing the piano, and we'd be singin' and looking in each other's eyes." Their relationship was sufficiently open that the nurses knew that Mary would be in Doris' bedroom when she was off duty. Doris was Canadian and returned to Canada with her family. Mary decided to follow her, against the advice of the matron: "the matron of the hospital tried to warn me, I realize now. She had me in and said 'you know, you see too much of her' and 'don't give up your career,' and [I said] 'but I'm going to Canada.'"

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<sup>450</sup> Maureen, personal interview, 29 May 1998.

The relationship with Doris lasted eight years, six of which were happy ones. Things started to unravel when they went to Cape Cod for a vacation in 1956:

We thought we were the only two in the world...until we went with some straight girls to Cape Cod, to Provincetown of all places. And we went to Cape Cod, and, ah, I remember Doris saying, we were lookin' around at everything, 'my god, there's more than us around here'...The clues were them holding hands, and just it was so free and, and the straight girls were saying 'I think they're queer here.' Anyhow, Doris disappears that night, goes off and she gets herself a girlfriend down there. She, I mean, she was like a kid in a candy shop, she just, oh, thought it was just wonderful, and left me with these straight people. She took off. And it was after that that things started getting from bad to worse, but that's because she went wild. She was like a kid in a candy shop, which one can she have next.<sup>451</sup>

Mary and Doris, like many lesbians of this era, had no knowledge of lesbianism from family sources, school, or media, and Provincetown revealed to them the existence of a large lesbian community. They were both surprised and delighted. It was after this trip that they sought out lesbian community in Toronto, where they lived. The affirmation of community was an important step in Mary's knowledge of her sexuality, because now it was something that she knew she shared with others. They had also met some other Toronto lesbians while in Provincetown and continued to see them socially upon their return.

In 1962, Jill met her first serious love in art class at school, when they were both fourteen:

So we became really close friends. We bonded very strongly. Um, at the time she was, she did have another friend and the friendship was wavering a little, um, but there was, because I came in on the scene—his other friend's name was Chris—um, Chris was holding a pyjama party, and I had heard that Chris was a lesbian, and I got quite excited over that, and then I got quite excited at the thought of a pyjama party. Um, and as it turned out, um, it turned out to be just the three of us, and there was Chris on one side of me, and me in the middle, and Claire on the other side of me, and during this pyjama party Chris bends over and starts to kiss me. And I was quite enjoying this, when all of a sudden Claire jumps up, quite upset, um, yelling how disgusting this all was etc. etc. But, you

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<sup>451</sup> Mary, personal interview, 24 September 1998. This relationship is explored in greater depth in Chapter Four.

know, the funny thing is, about that—I’ve reflected back on this—um, she never had anything to do with Chris after that again but she stayed my closest friend. And I think that what she thought was most disgusting was the fact that it was Chris that I was kissing.<sup>452</sup>

School gossip had held that Chris was a lesbian, “and I believed it, too. And now I found out it was true...For me that was very exciting, ‘cause I already knew about myself. I just didn’t know how to, um, get any contact, so any time I heard that anyone was, I was thinking, hoping, ‘Oh. There’s got to be a way to make contact here.’” Jill already had a lesbian subjectivity, having known about herself since she was twelve: “Yeah, there was a girl, I stayed overnight at her house, and I don’t even remember her name, but I remember suggesting that we imitate certain body movements and things, and she lay on top of me and I thought, ‘this is wonderful.’ And I can remember all these emotions and feelings...” Her response to the girl was physical as well as emotional, and she did get aroused. “And that’s amazing,” she remarked, “when I think, at twelve. Twelve going on thirteen. That’s just at that age where those things are becoming alive, and yeah, I did feel quite excited. It’s incredible.”<sup>453</sup>

Her relationship with Claire was a deep one. “This was like, this was a crush,” she said. “It was a sudden thing, and it hit me and it was, and then, you know, when summer came, you know, I didn’t think of her any more...But, um, yeah, she called me her “special.” She was frightened. Her mother was a lesbian. She caught her mother kissing another woman once, and she was pretty upset about that.” Claire was in her mid-teens at the time, and it “wasn’t ok for her, it was too shocking.” The relationship between Jill and Claire did not become physical, however. Jill commented:

No, I, I slept with her every weekend and she wanted me to live with her, and my mother stopped that. And that was actually going to be the end result, I’m sure, but my mother didn’t like Claire. And I’m sure she must have thought that Claire was my lover. Um, but one day, ah, I was so passionate, and I just, I just

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<sup>452</sup> Jill, personal interview, 30 May 1998.

<sup>453</sup> Jill, personal interview, 30 May 1998.

asked her, 'could I kiss you?' There was this silence, and then she said, 'oh, go ahead then.' And at that I thought, 'oh no. That's not what I wanted to do. Not like that.' So I said no, I wouldn't, and we just carried on as normal. And then she gave me this old book, and she wrote in there about being her special friend. And I'm sure that, given time, because she begged me to live with her, um, when I went to England she begged me to come back, um, so we could be together. So had I not have gone, I really truly believe that it would have become something. I needed to give her time. I was ready, but she wasn't.<sup>454</sup>

The desire to kiss Claire was very much a physical one. Jill described her feeling for Claire as

Pure passion. Yeah. I loved her. I was in love with her. Pure passion. I had to get closer. Just lying beside her was agony. Total agony, I couldn't touch her. Oh, it was horrible. It was the agony and the ecstasy. I could have been in another room and that would have been agony too. But I was right there beside her, and I couldn't touch her, and I just, I don't know what came over me. I just thought 'oh my god, oh.' I don't think I'm usually that bold. Yeah, so, I don't know what would have happened, you know, if I had gone and kissed her. I don't know. Thinking about it now, she might have been extremely responsive to me. She didn't say 'no, that's disgusting.' So, I don't know, maybe I lost my chance there. I don't know. I certainly wasn't a threat to her in any way. And she was beautiful, I thought.<sup>455</sup>

These testimonies illustrate the intensity of first same-sex experiences for the narrators, their consequent importance in the formation of subjectivity, and the considerable risk involved in making sexual overtures to someone of the same sex in the period under study. In most cases, either the narrator herself or the girl or woman who would become her partner, at least temporarily, risked not only personal rejection but also exposure as a lesbian when she expressed her attraction physically. Schoolgirl crushes were one thing in the eyes of the public; physical relationships were quite another.

Was the risk taken because an innate drive was pushing outward and would not remain repressed? Many of the narrators would argue that that was indeed the case, yet the diversity of experience here problematizes a straightforward essentialism. While there were some narrators who had felt attractions towards girls or women long before expressing them physically and thus

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<sup>454</sup> Jill, personal interview, 30 May 1998.

<sup>455</sup> Jill, personal interview, 30 May 1998.

felt that this was their “natural” self finally finding expression, there were others whose same-sex attraction was sudden and without warning. Positing an essentialist view of repressed sexual orientation in these cases would be difficult unless one were to argue that the orientation was so repressed by heteronormativity that the narrator was unaware of her true nature. In order to make such a case, one would have to account for life circumstances so substantially different to those of other narrators as to account for this extreme repression.

I suggest instead that both the physical expression of long-held same-sex desires *and* the sudden exploration of same-sex sexuality were elements of the construction of subjectivities. Some narrators chose or were able, because of fortuitous circumstance, to explore their same-sex attractions upon first feeling them, whereas others may, whether because of lack of opportunity or fear of consequences, have waited until later in their childhood or adulthood to have a physical same-sex relationship. Subjectivity was under construction in both cases; it was simply the timing that was different.

### **Bisexuality**

Many of the narrators for this study had sexual relationships with men before adopting a lesbian identity, and for some it was an enjoyable part of their sexual history. Even those who found heterosexual sex enjoyable, however, do not now define themselves as being bisexual in terms of identity. Rather, most see their opposite-sex relationships as having occurred because heterosexuality was what was expected of women. Even if they enjoyed heterosexual sex, they suggest, and even if they cared deeply for male partners, they were really lesbians waiting to discover their true orientation.

During World War II, Anne dated frequently in college. She had sex with several men, but did not fully enjoy it. “I don’t think I ever had an orgasm,” she said. “I was always under the influence of alcohol. That’s why I really can’t remember much about them. I was always a bit pie-eyed, or I probably wouldn’t have done it. I didn’t enjoy it, no. These few that I chose to, in

Los Angeles, but you know, I've often wondered since, did I ever have an orgasm, and I doubt it. I doubt it. I mean, I enjoyed it, in a way, you know, but I didn't have what most people think of as, you know, some great big orgasm."<sup>456</sup>

When asked who had been the first woman she slept with, Anne said "The one in college who was my roommate, she was the first one. We shared a room, twin beds, at the sorority house. One time she introduced me to lesbian sex...We were both in our senior years, so I was about 21. So was she. We were seniors." It was the other woman who set the scene for the seduction:

I came home, I'd been out with this guy I'd been going with a lot, and having not heavy sex but sort of light sex with him. I really liked that guy, Bob, but he, I don't think we ever had intercourse. I don't think so. Again, with as much drinking as I did, it's hard to remember. But I came home one night and I don't know why, but that night, for some reason, she was set to go and got me into her side, her twin bed, and, ah, initiated me into it. I don't know, I don't know why she all of a sudden decided to do that, but I guess she'd been working up to it for a while or something. But I was quite willing, I was quite willing.<sup>457</sup>

Even though her sexual activity with men was not fully pleasurable, Anne suggests that she was more bisexual than lesbian in the 1940s. She continued to have relationships with men for some years. She was not repulsed by them, unlike many of the narrators interviewed for this study. In fact, there were several to whom she was very attracted. Moreover, that she did not have orgasms with men should not be taken necessarily as meaning that she was not really attracted to them. Anne did not have orgasms with most women either, and rarely allowed women to make love to her because they could rarely give her that kind of pleasure. More importantly, however, Anne's lack of experience of orgasm with men or women cannot be said to bear any relation to any sexual orientation. After all, if sexual orientation rested on the achievement of orgasm in sexual relationships, then many women—possibly the majority of

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<sup>456</sup> Anne, personal interview, 1 May 1998.

<sup>457</sup> Anne, personal interview, 1 May 1998.

women—would hardly be in a position to claim any sexual orientation at all. All those who “lay back and thought of the Empire,”<sup>458</sup> as Betty puts it, could not even be called heterosexual.

It was women to whom Anne was primarily attracted, and with whom she experienced the greater sexual satisfaction. After her affair with her roommate, Anne fell in love,

really in love, with someone when I was a freshman in college who was a singer... and I wanted to go to bed with her. In fact, it's one of the sharp memories that I have. And we slept in the same bed together at her family's house, nobody else was there, I don't think. But, I remember...shaking, I was so, um, intense about this, but she wasn't interested at that time and I didn't have the nerve to even try anything, you know, so we didn't have sex. But I remember the physical, um, emotion that I had over that woman. It was only after I went to Los Angeles and she came out there to Hollywood that we actually had sex together and not very, about twice in all, because she wasn't really as much interested in me as I was in her, you know. But, um, so it wasn't until much later that I actually had sex with her.<sup>459</sup>

Anne did not form a long-term relationship with a female partner until she met “Ted,” with whom she lived for over a decade, in the 1950s.

While many of the women interviewed for this study had desires for both sexes before 1965, and many had relationships with both, Anne is the only narrator to suggest that she was bisexual at this point in her life. Several factors may account for this. A major reason, and one which has posed problems for lesbian historians in the past, is the community hostility towards bisexual women which resulted in many bisexual women either leaving the community or subsuming bisexual desires under a lesbian identity label. It is always much more difficult to locate bisexual narrators than lesbian ones, as Kennedy and Davis found in the research that resulted in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. But it is also the case that a hierarchy used to be in operation in some segments of the lesbian community between “pure” lesbians—those who

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<sup>458</sup> Betty, personal interview, 28 September 1996.

<sup>459</sup> Anne, personal interview, 1 May 1998.

had never had sexual contact with a man—and those who had had heterosexual contact, making some lesbians reluctant to discuss “non-lesbian” behaviours.

It is also the case that, in the period under study, bisexuality was not a category used in public discourse or medical terminology. The dichotomization of heterosexuality and homosexuality most often resulted in bisexual behaviour being interpreted as incipient homosexuality. While Alfred Kinsey might have been prepared to see sexuality as a continuum and to reveal the considerable amount of bisexual behaviour among Americans, few in North America were willing to see same-sex relationships as meaning anything other than that the individual was really homosexual. It is likely, therefore, that many women who experienced bisexual desires and had bisexual sexual experiences ended up having to “choose” between heterosexuality and lesbianism, having no bisexual identity category, community, or subcultural norms to hold on to. Many bisexual women probably left the lesbian community to marry, subsuming their same-sex desires, and many may have subsumed their opposite-sex desires in order to remain in the lesbian community.

Also important is the structure of the coming out narrative itself, which necessarily must discount earlier opposite-sex experience as of lesser importance, if not as representative of conformity to heteronormativity. The focus in the coming out narrative is the end product: the lesbian identity. Evidence of behaviour which problematizes that clear identity category must be explained away or excised so as to maintain the integrity of the presently-held identity. In such circumstances, few lesbians are prepared to describe themselves as previously having been bisexual or heterosexual, preferring instead to portray heterosexual behaviour as a step they had to go through before they were strong enough to live as lesbians.

I would be inclined to see several of the narrators as bisexual in their attractions and desires in the period under study, although none of them held to a bisexual identity at the time or since. This is not to say that they were bisexual in any innate and essentialist sense, but rather that, before 1965, they had attractions to both sexes and that their opposite-sex relationships

could not be said to be merely an acquiescence to heteronormative standards. Clearly, several of the narrators—Anne, Reva, and Magda especially—had opposite-sex relationships that were neither unpleasant nor sexually repulsive. Compared to others among the narrators, who attempted opposite-sex relationships and experimentation but were repulsed by them, or who experienced only same-sex attractions, these narrators may be said to have had bisexual attractions. To acknowledge this fact does not, in any way, undermine or negate the importance of their stating clear lesbian identities in the present.

### **Sexual Practices In Relationships Between Women**

It has long been a peculiar and irritating tendency of the heterosexual community to ask what lesbians do in bed, but there is actually some historical merit in the question. In evaluating precisely what sexual practices were known to the narrators, what pleasures they discovered, and when, and what behaviours were acceptable and unacceptable to them, one can learn much about the amount of information with which they entered sexual relationships, the degree to which it was possible to experience and explore sexual desires in the absence of knowledge about sexuality, and the differences between Canadian lesbians' practices and those of their American counterparts.

The overwhelming majority of these women had little or no information regarding the mechanics of sexual expression, the nature of their bodies, and the ways in which different parts of the body could be used sexually, yet they managed, largely through experimentation, to discover a wide range of sexual practices. Most moved very quickly from kissing to fondling to genital activity. Once reached, genital sexuality most often involved clitoral stimulation and vaginal penetration. For many, it also involved oral sex, and for a few, the use of dildos. And all this in an era of complete silence about the latter two practices especially. Lillian Faderman is right to suggest that many nineteenth-century women must have internalized the passionlessness they were said to represent. But I contend that these twentieth-century narrators were not

necessarily that much more knowledgeable about sexuality than were their forebears. Although perhaps more aware than nineteenth-century women that they actually *had* desires, they had no idea what to do with them until they tried.

The narrators were able to discover and enjoy a wide range of sexual practices simply by experimentation, in an era in which some of their sexual practices—manual vaginal penetration, oral sex, and the use of dildos— were not discussed in available literature, which suggests that they located sensitive and pleasurable areas of the body and explored various ways of stimulating them to the best of their imaginations and aided by the real physical responses of the body. That they did so should caution us to be careful about assuming the absence of any sexual practice simply because it was not spoken of in public discourse. To be sure, greater knowledge did often mean greater expertise and flexibility in sexual practice, which some of the testimonies below illustrate well. But even those who were most ignorant about their bodies were able to find pleasure, including genital pleasure. In recognizing their achievement of pleasure in an era of ignorance we must also question our previous assumptions about the allegedly non-sexual women of earlier centuries, for surely, however limited their knowledge, they also had responsive bodies on occasion and inquisitive minds, given the opportunity.

Opportunities for sexual activity varied by age and class. Very young women lived at home, for the most part, and their behaviour was restricted as a result. They made use of parental absences and ignorance, stole away as often as they could, and used the traditional sleepover in a decidedly non-traditional way.<sup>460</sup> Many of the women in this study had their first sexual experiences with schoolfriends.

Arlene discovered boys at age eight, and at age nine, in 1955, discovered girls. She spoke to her mother about it: “At one point, about 14, I asked my mother if there was something wrong with me, that I didn’t like boys. She told me not to worry, it was just a stage, it would go

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<sup>460</sup> As the interviews, discussed below, will show, young lesbians made use of whatever opportunities presented themselves, and in most cases parents were none the wiser.

away.” The girls were her own age, and mostly were her classmates. They experimented with the sexuality they saw in films. “There was not really that much to it,” she said. “We’d go to the show, and what we saw in the movies, we’d go home and practise. That’s what we were doing.” They did not discuss what they were doing: “No, either one of us, whichever home we were in - we’d phone our mothers and tell them we were staying overnight, and we’d have supper and we’d go to bed and we’d practise...We really didn’t have any clue.”<sup>461</sup> She does not appear to count this early experimentation as sex, however, suggesting that the first time she had sex with a woman was when she ran away from 999 Queen Street, where she was institutionalized when she was sixteen.<sup>462</sup>

Because of masturbation, Maureen had some idea of physical pleasure from a young age: “I was very aware of how my body worked, and I knew how I craved touch - any kind of touch. But, I know with Carol it was just, ‘oh, let’s just slip out of our pyjamas...’ You know, just the cuddling, and at that point neither one of us even had any breasts at all...but there was some touching, and ‘what would it be like to kiss a boy?’” Maureen realized even at this early age that she was using words about her body and was taking the lead. There was kissing and fondling, but “with Marilyn it became more than that. I think she was interested in how her body worked and, and yet was quite repressed. She’s a very mild personality even now, and wouldn’t have experimented on her own, and I think was quite pleased to have somebody teach her how her body worked.”<sup>463</sup>

Veronica’s first lesbian experience was with a schoolfriend in the 1950s. During a sleepover at Veronica’s house, they became physically intimate. She initially said that it was “just a lot of touching and carrying on and feeling a lot of, you know, very good things.” The

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<sup>461</sup> Arlene, LMH interview, 6 May 1987.

<sup>462</sup> Arlene, LMH interview, 6 May 1987.

<sup>463</sup> Maureen, personal interview, 29 May 1998.

relationship continued until they both married. They were not dating as such, but rather would be drawn to each other whenever they were alone. They continued their sleepovers,

And there was her poor mother downstairs, you know, I'm sure. You know, we'd be up there...we're 16 years old. We were just so enraptured and so carried away, we could have carried on. And I'm sure her mother knew. And I'm sure her mother used to talk to her, Marilyn's aunt, whose daughter is [also a lesbian], she's out there. Maybe this was going on at the same time, you know, in her life, yeah. Yeah, so that was basically it, like in each other's homes. We never went anywhere and expressed anything...You know, and it was like, um, I've thought of this since I was talking to you, um, I remember one time Marilyn and I were having a wonderful time and she [Veronica's aunt] arrives and all of a sudden there we were in the bathroom. I don't know what the hell my aunt was thinking, and you know, I don't know how long we were in there, but it was so good to see her, and it was so, it was wonderful.<sup>464</sup>

Veronica and Marilyn experimented with sex to find out what they liked. "We weren't using vibrators, you know, it was as much as one can do without contraptions," she said.

Jane was introduced to lesbian sexuality by a schoolfriend, without ever herself having had desires for other girls. She recounted one night in 1939 or 1940 when

there was one friend, um, in high school...she'd invite me over to her house and her mother was always out, and, um, we'd be in her room and fooling around, and she was one that started fooling around sexually...And we just sort of laughed and it was fun as well as exploration, and, um, I, I didn't see anything wrong with it, except I was kind of afraid of anybody knowing. But that probably went on for about a year in high school.<sup>465</sup>

Jane was approximately thirteen at the time. It was her friend who made the first move, asking her "have you ever tried this?," to which she replied "No." Next, "she had me start touching myself, and, ah, she was doing the same. I think there was twin beds in her room. And, ah, she wanted to touch me, and wanted me to touch her and stuff. So it was, um, quite fun, really...and we would laugh and talk about it...Wasn't a whole body exploration, it was just the

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<sup>464</sup> Veronica, personal interview, 27 September 1998.

<sup>465</sup> Jane, personal interview, 1 October 1998.

genitals.” The encounter did not blossom into a long-term relationship, however, as Jane discovered aspects of her friend’s character that she found disturbing:

she had some guys come over, and, um, she was all set for it. She was raring to go, she was gonna get these guys and pet and, ah, I don’t know, I think it happened for a little while, and, um, I wasn’t too impressed with it. Anyway, that was sort of that, and then I guess that part of that time left when I left school, and I really didn’t see her again for a long time.<sup>466</sup>

It was not the bisexual nature of the activity which disturbed Jane, but rather that her friend was interested in multiple partners at one time. Jane subsequently married twice and had no further relationships until she came out as a lesbian in the 1970s. “This is what you were supposed to do,” she commented. “You were supposed to grow up and get married and most of the people I knew were doing that.”

When I asked Magda how she and Gladys, the teacher who was her first female partner, would make love to each other, Magda commented,

Well, kissing is kissing, lips onto lips, and certainly she would suck on my ears, and believe it or not, I can’t have anybody else do that to this day. I don’t know why, it’s just a block. I can’t do it any more. And she would, she fondled my breasts, and she caressed my entire body, including my vagina area. And as a result, I had a very satisfying climax. And I did the same to her, and she had one as well. And one of the nicest parts about Gladys and my’s relationship was that we both wanted to go together, and we most often did. We trained ourselves to do that, because we knew how much fondling each one of us needed to do that. Just wonderful. But yeah, there was nothing that we did to each other that would ever, most of the time I term the whole thing as a missionary attitude toward sex. There was no tools, there was no play tools or anything, it was just done with hands or whatever, lips and hands. Because even to this day I think that I can arouse somebody and they can arouse me, without the tools and the playtoys, and to me it’s more intense if you can do this, and when I make love, if somebody wants it, I will do it, and vice versa. So nothing is dirty or unapproachable in the love-making act to me. So to explain to you what I did is basically physical touching and feeling, um, conversation, words, tenderness, um, exploring. Every part of the body was a sensual area.<sup>467</sup>

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<sup>466</sup> Jane, personal interview, 1 October 1998.

<sup>467</sup> Magda, personal interview, 29 September 1998.

They experimented with various sexual practices. Magda remarked, “Oh, sure. I don’t think the experimental stuff ever ends, because you know, the body’s such a large area and there’s so many sensitive cells on it.” Their experimentation did not lead to oral sex, however. She was not aware of oral sex at this stage of her life. “And, um, it’s only happened a very few times with me. I think that’s a very special thing to do, and unless the [time] is right, unless the temperature of our bodies are right, the emotion is right, I think oral sex should be saved,” she said.<sup>468</sup>

Some women were able to gain sexual experience with rather less secrecy than was required if one were still living at home. Some urban working-class lesbians were able to take advantage of the availability of “no questions asked” cheap accommodation. Jean reported that, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Toronto lesbians could rent a room on Centre Island if they wanted a private place to have sex: “There were hotels there, yeah. There were two...And at this particular time we were, I don’t know, we didn’t even try to hide it. We hold hands, neck in the theatre, we didn’t try to hide it.”<sup>469</sup> They would also neck in the theatres in Toronto, where apparently no-one would bother them. Another narrator spoke of renting rooms in Chinatown in Toronto. They would go

To a room, usually in Chinatown, Cochrane Hotel, eh, and get it for what, 6 bucks a night, screw your brains out. There was a couple on Jarvis Street too...they didn’t ask questions. You paid your money and that was it. Sometimes 3 bucks a night, depending on where you went. A lot of us used to go to the Ford Hotel. The Ford Hotel in Chinatown.<sup>470</sup>

Before 1965, during her relationships with her roommate in college, the singer, and Ted, Anne’s sexual experience with women “was only, um, lovemaking in bed, not even, ah, oral, it

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<sup>468</sup> Magda, personal interview, 29 September 1998.

<sup>469</sup> Jean, Lesbians Making History interview, 16 November 1985.

<sup>470</sup> Anon, Lesbians Making History interview, 23 November 1992.

was only, you know, hand and so forth. And body contact, but I don't think I ever got into oral sex until much later, um, certainly not in the 40s or 50s. Even in the 60s, um, I think of that more when I got to Regina [in 1965]." She did not know what to do from any books or other sources, but rather from "instinct, I think, just overwhelming attraction to somebody, you know. I didn't read about that kind of thing at that time, at all, so I was just doing what came naturally, I guess." Regarding her partners, she said "if they had any previous experience they would have known more than I did, and I think Ted had had at least one previous experience."<sup>471</sup>

I asked Phyl who had made the first move. "I'm not positive," she said. "As far as kissing, it might have been me, I don't know. The rest of it was her." Their first kiss occurred at Phyl's partner's house, where she lived with her mother and stepfather:

after we finished playing cards, they, by this time it was like 11, they'd be gone to bed, and we usually, we'd sit and chat for a while. Then we, it was like kids, just like teenagers, we'd be between the front door and the next door in. We would stand in there for ages, you know, talking, and giving little kisses and everything else. And then one time they must have been to bed for a while, and we started kissing, and that's when she started undoing my clothing, but to me it didn't seem anything extraordinary. I didn't even, actually, I quite believe I didn't think anything about it except it was good. But the next day, when I saw her the next evening, she was quite horrified over this whole thing and she kept apologizing to me, she didn't know what got into her, whatever else, and I looked at her and I said to her, like 'what are you talking about?' She said, she'd never done that, 'I've never done that before ever in my life. I apologize.' And I said to her, 'just don't apologize, and we'll just keep going.' And that was it.<sup>472</sup>

That first night comprised mainly kissing and fondling, neither of the women knowing very much about sexuality. Nothing about the evening shocked Phyl:

See, nothing seemed extraordinary to me. It's like, it's not like one of these great stories where somebody all of a sudden realizes they're a gay and

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<sup>471</sup> Anne, personal interview, 1 May 1998.

<sup>472</sup> Phyl, personal interview, 28 September 1998.

whatever. It's just that my person hadn't come along yet, and now here they were and nothing seemed unusual to me, you know?<sup>473</sup>

Phyl described a close call that occurred only a few months after they had been together.

In December 1959,

at Christmas, we decided to go with a couple of women that we worked with, who certainly weren't gay, to Buffalo for the weekend. Just for a good weekend. And I had never been there, so this was good for me...Well, this has been the first time I've been away like that with my girlfriend, and so, we were great on the kissing bit. Do you know, your mouth can, my lips completely swelled up. This was in an afternoon when everybody was so tired we each stayed in our rooms. These other two women shared and we two shared. And that worried me sick about that night. We were going out. We were trying to get the swelling down. That, I had forgotten about that. I can remember that and think, 'oh my god.' And then my girlfriend's saying to me 'oh you've got to do something about this,' you know. And I was thinking one of these people knew. I guess that worried me. Well, it always worried me what people thought about me, not from the gay sense either...But nothing was said, and who knows what they thought.<sup>474</sup>

The physical relationship developed from the kissing and fondling. "There was no one particular thing once you got together, and it was everything," Phyl said, "Because to me it just seemed all, just the way it was, and there wasn't any one particular thing. No, I just liked anything and everything. Yeah. And also, um, being that close to somebody, just saying whatever you wanted to say, regardless of what it was."

Once Reva's relationship became physical, it developed quite quickly. Although in love with Reva, Reva H. waited until she had finished with her husband before moving to a physical relationship. After George moved out, Reva H. had the place to herself and her new partner came over regularly, "and it was steamy nights after steamy nights. And I, honest to god, that first time we made love I had never known what real passion was, ever. In spite of all the good

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<sup>473</sup> Phyl, personal interview, 28 September 1998.

<sup>474</sup> Phyl, personal interview, 28 September 1998.

times with men, and all the orgasms, and everything else, I had never experienced that passion that I had with Reva. It was like ‘wow, where’d this come from?’”<sup>475</sup>

Sexual pleasure with women was different for Reva H. She found that a different type of connection occurred between her and Reva than the connection she had with her husband:

I think for me pleasurable became the reciprocal side of it. I think with men it’s more they do it to you, with women we do it for each other, and I like that side. I think, I don’t know, it’s always, it always felt to me that there was a little bit of a power thing, like they were the man and I was the woman and I had my role and he had his role and we knew what those roles were. And with women, I don’t find the roles getting in my way. It was more reciprocal and more sharing and you could be more open in ways, I could be more open in ways that I couldn’t be with men, even physically more open.<sup>476</sup>

“Right away,” she said, “the first time that Reva and I ventured into a physical side of our relationship, I had already felt this really strong connection in other ways, so the physical thing was just the completion of the circle.” She didn’t feel the same with her husband: “Like I enjoyed the sex, but it was just sex, it could have been me and my vibrator, I don’t know. I mean, what is sex? It’s nothing in and of itself, but it was a connecting, it was the way that we touched, the way that we could talk, the way that we could caress afterwards and didn’t mean we were going to go another round necessarily. It was just a pleasure all by itself.”<sup>477</sup>

Their physical relationship was initially exploratory. Reva H. commented, “We didn’t have a clue. We just kind of tentatively tried this and that. Started off with kissing, we kind of learned our way. It was really slow, it was exploratory.” The novels she had read were not very explicit, “so you couldn’t really kind of go ‘oh, well, they did that in the book’, you know. They didn’t tell you a lot beyond kissing like they did, so we kind of made it up.” The novels “talked about, you know, passion, but they didn’t talk about how you did this. They didn’t say ‘I put my

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<sup>475</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

<sup>476</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

<sup>477</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

hand into her wet cunt' or, they didn't use that kind of language, it was more genteel, you know?"<sup>478</sup>

Reva may have regarded the novels as genteel, but the broader Canadian society did not. In 1952, the National News Company of Ottawa was charged with eleven counts of having obscene matter in its possession for distribution. The Torres novel *Women's Barracks* was one of the items of "obscene" literature. It was argued that the novel had the capacity to deprave and corrupt susceptible individuals, particularly children. The lesbian content of the novel, while not its main focus, became the focus of the trial, the Crown Attorney arguing that the picture of lesbianism presented in the novel was an inviting one, while the defence attorney argued that the book could serve as a cautionary tale against lesbianism.<sup>479</sup> Whether or not lesbians found the pulp novels useful as sex manuals, the judicial system assumed that they would provide exactly the kind of inspiration lesbians were looking for, and would even inspire girls and women to become lesbians.

In Reva's opinion, "it was more the story [in the novels] than the explicit sex, and was about you know, lesbian passion and how in the end some man saves [one of the women], and the other one is crushed, or commits suicide. They always had a bad ending, or almost always." She expanded:

They didn't really go into that much detail. They went into she undressed, her hot hands on her body kind of imagery, you know, the excitement... but there was nothing, there was not very much to tell you how to proceed really. I don't think, in my recollection, I don't remember that I had any hot tips out of these books. They were just kind of build-up to the fact that this woman that allowed this other woman to actually touch her naked body, to kiss her all over, and you never exactly figured out how they got to the climaxing parts, but you got to use your imagination, I guess, if you could.<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

<sup>479</sup> Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 158-165.

<sup>480</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

Reva H. was the only one in their relationship who had had any kind of sexual experience. Even she found it “a little bit [scary]. I thought ‘I know what to do with George, I haven’t got a clue what to do with her.’ And, I don’t know, somehow, you know, making love is a natural thing. It really cleared up quickly enough. We found our way to it easily enough.”

Pam’s ignorance about sexual matters was a hindrance to her enjoyment of early relationships. “I wouldn’t let anyone even go near me,” she said. “I just didn’t. I, ah, I was fine, I made love, I wasn’t made love to. I just couldn’t...I don’t know why, until much later when I did meet with a woman that wouldn’t take no for an answer, and I thought, ‘oh my, I’ve been doing without all this for so long. Poor old me.’”<sup>481</sup> She did engage in oral sex after that point, but did not know what a dildo was, although she had heard them mentioned and was always too embarrassed to ask about them. She was lucky to be rescued from her ignorance by a lover who knew much about the female body and showed her what to do. When she revealed to her lover that she did not know how to masturbate, her lover showed her:

a girl one time had me on my knees, I was saying “I don’t know.” She said “well, let me show you.” I will never forget it. I didn’t, I didn’t know, I said, but you see, this was all before this gal that all of a sudden, you know, just threw me over and then said this is it. Well, oh, this feeling, I never had that. All this time, you know, it was like, I don’t know, it was like rollin’ around doin’ nothin’. Now, you know, when I think about it, thanks for the memories, you know. Makin’ things come back that I’d rather die of embarrassment.<sup>482</sup>

Pam lamented her ignorance and the lack of information she had had in the early days, commenting: “But it’s true, it was stupid, I mean, we didn’t know, and nobody talked. There’s things today that someone will say to me, ‘did you know such and such?’ ‘No. Did you?’ ‘Oh, I just found out.’ So, you know, it was things that you never talked about - who did what with who, you know, it was just not said.”<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998.

<sup>482</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998.

<sup>483</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998.

Deborah does not think that she and her first partner, the schoolgirl in South Africa, experimented sexually or that there was a learning curve. She knew what to do. She commented “No, I don’t believe so. It just seemed to me quite an automatic thing.” Her early lesbian experiences were not in the least problematic. Rather, it was her later heterosexual activity that was difficult:

Oh no, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. I had difficulty with heterosexual relationships. That literally was close your eyes and think of England, but I had to find out what this was about, and even with this married man that I had my most long-term heterosexual relationship with, um, I could think of a thousand excuses why we should not be doing this. You know, your wife is on the telephone. It was the idea of being heterosexual that I was trying to achieve. The actual physical, lesbian side of it was the most ordinary thing for me that there was.<sup>484</sup>

“I think I knew right from the beginning what I wanted to do,” she said. “I’m sure I grew a little more adept as times went on, but it never was a difficulty.” Deborah’s testimony on the subject of experimentation is somewhat contradicted, however, by her acknowledgement that the girls did “try things” to see how they would feel: “I think it certainly became, does this feel good? This feels good.”

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Billie grew up in Ontario in a family that was unusual because her mother openly had affairs. She was not necessarily talked to about sexuality, but she witnessed her mother with men on several occasions. She does remember that she was caught masturbating and her mother explained to her that she should not do it, but she did not tell her why.<sup>485</sup> Billie went out with men for a number of years before she became intimate with a woman, although she did not have full heterosexual intercourse. She was in the air force, and

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<sup>484</sup> Deborah, personal interview, 29 September 1998.

<sup>485</sup> Billie, personal interview, 23 September 1998.

they were watched very carefully. In addition, she was afraid of pregnancy and what it would do to her reputation.

She does not remember well the first time that she made love with a woman, but is sure that she did not make the first move:

She did. In fact, she would probably do everything. I wasn't even, I don't think I did anything at all, and that went on a long time during the affair. Um, I thought that's the way it was, and I think you do in your first experience, because you're not fully aware that you're supposed to participate. This is lovely, I'll do this. I can do this. And I think it was probably years later before I made love to a woman. Got out of the airforce, came back, had an affair with her, and she showed me different things to do, and that's the first time I think I actually participated. I thought you were just, 'ok, I'll lay here and enjoy this.' And she was the one that actually, you know, said to me, 'here's what you do.' We spent hours and hours.<sup>486</sup>

The same woman introduced Billie to oral sex. "The other women had not done that," she said.

And I found that intriguing, because I wanted to do that. Like, I, she was a very clean woman, and she smelled like she just stepped out of a bathtub, with baby powder on. That, a woman does that and walks by me, I'm done. You know that smell, that clean? And I found it really, really sexual. It was just a thing. yes, I did find it, because I got into that which I found, and I wondered why the women before that hadn't done that. You know, it was just kind of a...we didn't talk about it in those days.<sup>487</sup>

Prior to this experience, Billie's lovemaking was primarily manual stimulation and penetration.

Oral sex or cunnilingus has been thought of as the quintessential lesbian sexual practice, but of course it is very commonplace in heterosexual activity as well.<sup>488</sup> It was less common

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<sup>486</sup> Billie, personal interview, 23 September 1998.

<sup>487</sup> Billie, personal interview, 23 September 1998.

<sup>488</sup> Alfred Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, 257-8 & 467. Kinsey's data suggested that, compared to 20% of females with some coital experience and 46% with extensive coital experience who had accepted male stimulation of their genitalia, and 16% and 43% respectively who had performed oral stimulation of male partners, 78% of those women who had had extensive same-sex relationships listed oral stimulation of the genitalia as a common sexual technique.

among lesbians before the 1970s than after, however, perhaps because the 1970s witnessed strong campaigns to educate women about their sexual pleasure and the health and goodness of their bodies. Oral sex was a surprise that was sprung on Reva H. by her lover:

I knew that penetration wasn't gonna be part of this picture because we didn't have the equipment, but we had fingers I guess, I don't know. I think that's where it all led, initially. But I think soon enough we figured out what we liked, what we didn't like, what felt good, what didn't feel good, and I remember the first time Reva said to me 'I want to go down on you' I thought 'what's that?' And I was like 'wow, this is different.'

KD: Now where did she...?

Oral sex, I don't know where she got it from. I don't know if she got it out of her head or where or what.

KD: And that was the phrase that she used, go down on you? [I think so, Reva interjected] I wonder where did she get that information from?

I think that's what she said. I don't remember exactly, but that's what she wanted to do, and it was a new move. I was like 'oh, ok.'<sup>489</sup>

They had been in a relationship for several months before they reached this level of intimacy. "It came out of the blue," Reva said,

Wasn't anything I read or heard about or knew about, and in fact I thought to myself 'what the hell is she doing? What's happening? What is it?' Well, I liked it, of course, but I was kind of surprised, you know, like it was unlike anything I had done, even with men, up to that point, or had heard of, or that. Ok. So I don't know where she got this, she may have read this in a book, because she read many of these books. A book might have talked about it.<sup>490</sup>

Oral sex was not part of their regular love-making, however. They tried it only a few times.

Pat described her own upbringing as cold and inhibited, a point that was brought home to her when she began to date French-Canadian women. "A couple of French women that I can think of," she said,

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<sup>489</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

<sup>490</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

I could honestly say that they probably taught me an awful lot, because they weren't inhibited. I was, probably because I had come from such a cold, um, and like sex wasn't discussed...so there was a lot of, um, I was probably quite inhibited, when I think about it. And so, when I was with these women, not all together but separately [laughs], they were mostly French-Canadian women, now that I think about it, and they were very, very liberal and very open and sex was very important to them, and you learned not to be so uptight about it. So, yeah, I was taught probably by them. You know, I never thought about it like that, but I guess so. Because I must have been uptight, really. But French-Canadian women were very open as far as sex is concerned.<sup>491</sup>

Pat did not specify which sexual practices the French-Canadian women taught her, but mentioned them during a conversation about oral sex, so it might be reasonable to assume that that might have been one of them.

After Pat returned to Montréal, she met Robyn. "Now, Robyn was much more experienced than I was," she said, "and I was eighteen, and I didn't know much about women at all. But she taught me. But she was quite ruthless. Perfect name, it was very appropriate. She was bisexual. Yes, she was. I learned a lot...I guess, maybe it was Robyn, maybe that taught me mostly everything I knew. Before it was all like puppy love kind of stuff, you know."<sup>492</sup>

### **Butches, Femmes, Dildos, and the Border**

That some women did know "what to do" has been made clear in several works on the working-class lesbian bar cultures of the early and mid-twentieth century. The most extensive of these, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, is a groundbreaking work that challenges lesbian-feminist perceptions of the butch and femme women of the bar culture as uncritically imitative of heterosexuality.<sup>493</sup> The nature of the butch-femme community is explored more fully in Chapter

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<sup>491</sup> Pat, personal interview, 24 September 1998. The degree to which Pat's assumptions about the greater sexual liberalism of French-Canadians are accurate is beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>492</sup> Pat, personal interview, 24 September 1998. The hostility towards bisexuals is discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>493</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. The work was originally published by Routledge in 1993.

Five. In terms of sexuality, it may be said that the butch-femme relationship was a complex dyad in which normative heterosexuality was sometimes copied, but often was subverted. Kennedy and Davis reveal that the butch-femme relationship created and expressed “a distinctive lesbian eroticism.”<sup>494</sup> While the butch woman was presumed to be the physically active partner, the “doer” and the leader, her role was to please the femme woman. Unlike normative sexuality in the postwar era, the butch-femme erotic emphasized the feminine partner’s pleasure as primary. The butch woman found her pleasure in pleasing the femme woman. The latter was not merely receptive; the femme woman actively sought her own pleasure.

Kennedy and Davis make the point that the butch-femme sexual relationship both imitated and transformed heterosexual patterns.<sup>495</sup> It would be naive to suggest that the butch-femme relationship always operated in this transformative manner and that butches never adopted some of the less noble aspects of masculinity; there were, in the relationships among Buffalo women, many instances of abuse. Kennedy and Davis do illustrate, however, that it was in the working-class, butch-femme lesbian community that women’s sexual autonomy and pleasure was first promoted, decades before lesbian-feminists would write about lesbian sex. Kennedy and Davis interviewed a wide range of lesbians in Buffalo, New York about their sexual practices in the decades before the 1970s. The most popular sexual practices were dyking, or tribadism, manual stimulation, and oral sex. Only some of the women used dildos; most viewed them as unnecessary to female pleasure. One of the most significant aspects of their research is the revelation that there were a large number of “stone” butches or

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<sup>494</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 191.

<sup>495</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 192.

“untouchables” in the Buffalo community.<sup>496</sup> The women Kennedy and Davis interviewed varied widely in their degree of knowledge about sex, some knowing what they wanted to do from a very young age and some requiring the assistance of lovers and friends in the gaining of sexual skills.

In terms of sexuality, Canadian butches and femmes operated with the same roles as did American ones. Arlene commented, “Oh, usually, the butches did everything. You know. Femmes got to lay there and enjoy everything.”<sup>497</sup> Contrary to the kind of butch mentoring described in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* and in the novel *Stone Butch Blues*, however, butches in Canada seemed not to be given any instruction in the proper behaviour, sexual and otherwise, of the butch.<sup>498</sup> “Baby butches”, as they were called, had to fend for themselves. Arlene commented that she knew what to do, even when she had her first sexual experience, which was with a heterosexual woman. Even the butch woman Arlene had met when she was a patient in 999 Queen Street, her first lesbian friend, did not discuss sex with her: “As far as sex was concerned it was find out on your own. We talked about - it was more like locker-room talk: ‘Oh pick her up, she’s good,’ this kind of stuff. Nothing ever really really personal. It just - it was there. It was that simple,” she said. “I knew what to do. I don’t know how I knew, and I’ve heard that from a lot of people.”<sup>499</sup>

Femmes, too, knew what they wanted sexually. Arlene did not know if femmes talked about sex either: “I don’t know. It worked. It was just there. And I’ve heard this from a lot of

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<sup>496</sup> A stone butch was a lesbian who did not like to be touched sexually and who obtained the entirety of her sexual pleasure in the act of sexually pleasing a femme. Many stone butches reported being able to achieve orgasm without being touched. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 208-209.

<sup>497</sup> Arlene, LMH interview, 6 May 1987.

<sup>498</sup> Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* (New York: Firebrand, 1993).

<sup>499</sup> Arlene, LMH interview, 6 May 1987.

people—I've asked the same question of a lot of people, and same thing: it was there. They knew what they wanted, and once they got in bed, they knew what to do. I know that's strange."<sup>500</sup>

Butch and femme roles were not always rigid, however. Some lesbians moved between categories. Arlene changed from the butch to the femme role when she moved in with a woman who was still living with her common-law husband. At first the relationship was platonic. The reversal of roles for Arlene changed when the relationship became sexual: "One thing led to another and we ended up in bed. And she just turned to me very calmly and said 'You know, I think I can do this better than you.' And it was that simple! No big moral decision, no nothing; it was just: ok. It was just like that: bang. And we lived together like I said. So something worked." Their sexual relationship was a satisfying one, and was often "50-50":

Not all the time. There were times when she just - 'Don't touch me. Let me do it all.' But there were other times when there was real, real sexual experimentation going on between the two of us. You'd think: Oh, let's try this, and it would be: Okay, but what you do to me, I do to you! We did - one time my ex-husband was then a friend, he started explaining bondage, and we thought, Okay, let's try it. And it was point-blank: What you do to me, I do to you, and when you say stop you stop. Stop came very quickly. And -- she started to chicken out: 'Oh no no no, you're not going to do this.' And I said, 'Oh yes I am. What you do to me I do to you, in this one.' And it was the same thing. You try it; you don't like it; you don't do it again. The biggest thing I found out is that, when you're living with somebody for quite a bit, that people will come up to you and say, 'Aren't you getting bored?' And I'd look at them and say, 'Are you crazy?' The longer you're with somebody, the more you get to know them, the better things get. And they couldn't understand it.<sup>501</sup>

After she became a femme, Arlene began to be more critical of the sexual aloofness of butches. She remarked that "Well they seemed not to want to be touched. We'll do to you, but you won't touch us. Which I thought was kind of stupid. I couldn't see how they were getting

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<sup>500</sup> Arlene, LMH interview, 6 May 1987.

<sup>501</sup> Arlene, LMH interview, 6 May 1987.

that much out of it.” She did not talk to them about it, however. “That’s just the way things were,” she said. “There was no sense in sitting down and discussing it. It was the way they felt; that’s the way things were. Even now, if you bang into a few of the older ones, they’ll say ‘It took me years.’ A couple of them, it would be maybe three or four years before they’d let somebody touch them. And then they’d curse themselves: ‘My god, now I know what I was missing.’” When asked if butches had orgasms, she said “They’d claim they did. Without being touched. They could have orgasms; they just didn’t want you touching them. And to me, it never made sense.”<sup>502</sup>

When asked if there was a terminology in Canada to describe “stone” butches, Jan replied “Yeah. Not *stone* butches. You’d just say ‘She’s really dike, man.’ You didn’t like the word dike, because if you’re a dike you used to use a dike [a dildo], right?”<sup>503</sup> Arlene agreed that there were some butches who preferred to do all the love-making. She remarked that being butch “was a sexual thing for a lot of people. There were real sexual barriers.”<sup>504</sup> None of the narrators for this study identified as stone butches, and there are fewer reports of stone butches in Canada than there are for the States. Mary reported having a brief affair with one in the States: “And some butches, you know, like “don’t touch me.” Isn’t that a fact? Going back to that one-night stand I had in Cape Cod. She would not let me touch her. She was one of those. She was, yeah. And I think about it now. No, she didn’t want me touchin’ her fanny. That slays me, you know?”<sup>505</sup>

Anne tended to prefer to make love to women rather than to allow them to make love to her, yet she did not identify as a stone butch. Few women were able to please her sexually. “I

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<sup>502</sup> Arlene, LMH interview, 6 May 1987.

<sup>503</sup> Group interview, Lesbians Making History interviews, 19 October 1985.

<sup>504</sup> Arlene, LMH interview, 6 May 1987.

<sup>505</sup> Mary, personal interview, 24 September 1998.

did most of it,” she reported, “and there were very few, there were some that who really were good at making love to me, but a lot of them weren’t. I sort of was that type I guess. I didn’t like someone else making love to me unless, well, unless they were in some way exceptional, you know.” She remembered a notable exception to this general rule:

I remember, um, with another woman that I had an affair with who was from Chicago, this is one I haven’t even mentioned, but she and I had a short, we had one night together in New York when she happened to be in New York and I was in New York. And we went to bed together and she was the kind who absolutely wouldn’t let you touch her. She wanted to make love to me, but she said ‘no, you know, you can’t do that’ you know, ‘I don’t like it.’ And so I remembered that, because sometimes I’ve been a little like that, you know, with some people. But it was usually because they just were incapable.<sup>506</sup>

She was not repulsed by women making love to her. “It was only if I knew that they somehow either felt they didn’t want to do it or they weren’t very good at it or something that then I’d just, you know, I didn’t want ‘em to try. In a way, it was more sensitivity to their feelings about it,” she said.

There also seems to have been much less use of dildos in the Canadian lesbian community than occurred in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. Most of the narrators had never heard of a dildo until very recently. Billie was one of the few to have been introduced to this particular sexual practice in the 1960s by one of her more experimental partners. “She experimented with everything,” Billie said. “I won’t go into great detail, but everything. Oral sex, instruments, the whole thing, and I thought, well, maybe that’s what kept me going back for another lesson. But I never met, in my span in the 60s and 50s, 60s and 70s even, I don’t think I met too many women that, um, would wear a dildo or would wear, one had a vibrator, but that’s about all.” The woman owned her own dildo, made of rubber, and also had a vibrator. Billie commented, “it was funny, because she was very tasteful about it. She didn’t want to offend me,

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<sup>506</sup> Anne, personal interview, 1 May 1998.

but she wanted to try these things and show me what they could be like, and I thought ‘ok, I can do this.’”<sup>507</sup>

Neither of the two Revas knew anything about dildos, and they did not use them in their sexual relationship. “Never heard of them,” Reva H. said, “was not familiar with that. I think that the old-timey butches were into that. I think they used to wear them all the time sometimes, under their jeans so they’d look, I don’t know, well-hung or whatever. Ah, no, since I was a soft butch, I never heard about dildos ever, you know.”<sup>508</sup> Nor did she remember any of the novels mentioning dildos. Reva describes their entire sexual encounter as based on “‘how do you do this?’ uh, ‘let’s try this,’ ‘ok,’ ‘that felt good, let’s try that.’ And sometimes we talked about it, sometimes it occurred like spontaneous combustion, you know. We just, it was largely experiments, to see if this would work, that would work, I don’t know.”<sup>509</sup>

Lois was somewhat scathing about the use of dildos. She and her first lover had developed a satisfying sexual relationship quite quickly. “Well, we used the finger,” Lois acknowledged, “and well, um, the other thing—cunnilingus, they call it.” Later in their relationship, they experimented further. Lois commented, “of course, maybe everybody experimented with a dildo, but they didn’t work. At least, they didn’t work to my satisfaction. I don’t know. We tried one or two things like that once or twice, but we never really...It was enough to satisfy each other, that was all we did.”<sup>510</sup>

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<sup>507</sup> Billie, personal interview, 23 September 1998.

<sup>508</sup> A soft butch was a lesbian whose gender performance was on the masculine side, but not to the same degree as those who held to firm butch identities. A soft butch did not necessarily have to be in a relationship with a femme, and gendered behaviours were not as rigidly defined for soft butches as they were for those in butch/femme relationships.

<sup>509</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

<sup>510</sup> Lois, personal interview, 3 October 1998.

In neither of Deborah's early lesbian relationships was any form of dildo or other sex toy used. Deborah did not become familiar with dildos until the 1970s, when she was socializing with a larger lesbian community and came to know "a very raunchy couple, who would produce the dildos in the late evening." "At parties?," I asked. "Oh yes," she said, "at the drop of a hat, and throw them around and discuss them. I mean, and completely and totally upset older women at the time, so—say I was in my late thirties—maybe [they were] fifty, who would just get up and leave, but, I mean, these were things we just chucked around as toys and thought it was terribly funny. I think these two actually used it, and, but everybody else just screamed with laughter."<sup>511</sup> Deborah's earlier sexual practices did, however, include oral sex.

Phyl's sexual practices did not include the use of dildos. "I never even knew what a dildo was," she said. "Ok, it started in kisses and cuddles and whatever else, oral sex is fine with me, it was great, but I never went into using any things and I still have hangups about all this leathery bit." She did not know about oral sex when she was growing up, but remarked about it that "nothing's been strange to me. No, that wouldn't have been discussed, for sure, that would not be discussed...I loved it all, I did...Nothing shocked me, no. It didn't. In fact I felt just wonderful that this had all happened."<sup>512</sup>

It was when Pat lived in New York that she was exposed to a broader lesbian community, and she was introduced to new sexual practices. She found New York to be very different to Montréal:

In New York, I came across the apparatuses and the different, I mean the different, they were much more butch and femme in New York city than it was in Montréal. It was more pronounced in the Village in New York when I was there, and there was more sex. More sex, and there was pot, and more drinking, yeah. It was pretty wild in New York. But in Montréal it wasn't as wild as, it wasn't sex, sex, sex all the time, but, um, you know, you had a few drinks and,

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<sup>511</sup> Deborah, personal interview, 29 September 1998.

<sup>512</sup> Phyl, personal interview, 28 September 1998.

you know, ah, you'd end up in bed together. But there was nothing, no apparatus or anything. I don't remember. My first episode was in New York, and I found, I didn't find that interesting at all. But, um, there was oral sex then. Oh yeah. But you didn't talk about it, you just did it. I mean, you know, you went from a bar or a party to somebody's bed, and that was it. You really didn't make a big deal out of it.<sup>513</sup>

In the absence of much wider research, it is impossible to say with certainty whether or not Canadian lesbians as a whole were less likely to be stone butches or to use dildos than were American lesbians. Evidence from this small study suggests that this was the case, but a wider range of lesbians would have to be interviewed to ensure that customs of class and race do not account for some of the hostility of Canadian lesbians to these practices. A higher prevalence of butch/femme roles, stone butch identity, and use of dildos in the United States may be accounted for simply by periodization, however. After all, urban subcultures of lesbians had been in existence in the US since at least the 1920s, whereas in Canada such communities were just beginning to form during the Second World War. Subcultural norms which had become more widespread, if not hegemonic, among certain groups of lesbians in American cities did not have the same amount of time in which to take hold in Canada before second-wave feminism drove them underground because of their allegedly patriarchal nature.<sup>514</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The evidence discussed in this chapter shows that historians must be careful when making generalizations about the degree to which women would or would not have maintained physical sexual relationships with one another in particular historical periods. If one were fully to agree with Faderman that women in the era of the romantic friendships were unlikely to have explored a genital sexuality, one may risk ignoring evidence which suggests that a behaviour can occur in the absence of a language to describe it. Many of the women in this study were only marginally

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<sup>513</sup> Pat, personal interview, 24 September 1998.

<sup>514</sup> This argument is developed further in Chapter Four.

more knowledgeable about female sexuality than the women Faderman discusses would have been, yet they managed to form sexual relationships and to explore genital sexuality with each other. If this can be shown to be the case in the early twentieth century, when still very little information was available to young women—even though women were now at least assumed to be sexual—then we ought also to be careful about assuming too much ignorance in earlier historical subjects. Offering up the women in this study as necessarily more knowledgeable does both groups a disservice, for it undermines the potential for earlier women to have explored their sexuality even though they were not supposed to own one, and it fails to recognize the significance of the achievement later women made in finding their sexuality in a period still under a veil of silence about lesbianism.

This study also suggests that a wide variety of sexual practices featured in the Canadian lesbian and bisexual landscape before second-wave feminism, yet it also suggests that some practices and roles may have been less prevalent in Canada than in the United States. The most common sexual practices beyond necking were fondling, clitoral stimulation, and vaginal penetration. Oral sex and the use of dildos for penetration were rather less common. All of these practices, when occurring between women, were abhorred by the wider culture, and the narrators were aware, at least on a subconscious level, that what they were doing was regarded as unnatural. Even so, they eventually followed their desires rather than social norms.

And what of sexual activity and subjectivity? The narrators describe their discovery of sexual relationships with women in terms expressing a sense of coming home, of naturalness, and of rightness. Those who had had some heterosexual experience beforehand described it either as unnatural and uncomfortable, or as pleasurable but not as pleasurable or as intense as sexual activity with women. Even those who had no heterosexual experience, and thus no point of comparison, expressed the feeling of naturalness in their same-sex relationships.

For young women growing up with desires they were not supposed to have, the first experience of sexuality could be even more stressful than for young heterosexuals. Everyone

must face the fear of rejection, feelings of sexual ineptitude, and concerns about whether or not sexual activity is appropriate. Young lesbians had also to face the fear of exposure—that the potential rejection would not just be of their advances, but also a broader social isolation on the basis of sexuality. The risk of losing friends and becoming the target of gossip and harassment was considerable. That they took this first step, even if they did not initiate it, suggests great courage. But there was much at stake, for these women were expressing a developing subjectivity based on their attraction to women. That attraction could be repressed, silenced, or shelved away for a time because of heteronormativity, but in the case of all these women it eventually was expressed physically with another woman. When and how that occurred had great import for the development of subjectivity, for it was in that moment of first same-sex intimacy, mutually shared, that the narrators received crucial affirmation of their sexuality. When combined with an emotional relationship, physical intimacy was a powerful factor in their awareness of their difference from other girls and women, but also of their shared desires for other women.

In Chapter Two, I suggested that, for those narrators forming intimate same-sex relationships when they were young, emotional intimacy was a crucial factor in the formation of subjectivity, perhaps even more important than physical intimacy. One should not underestimate the importance of physical sexuality, however. The first explorations of sexuality and later explorations and expansions of sexual practice were, in same-sex relationships as well as opposite-sex ones, markers of adulthood, a passage of a sort into a new stage of life. That passage could take place early in life or late, but in either case it was a crucial part of many narrators' construction of a coherent subjectivity. In this way, physical intimacy was the outward expression of a lesbian subjectivity but also helped to form it. More than simply the result or endpoint of subjectivity development, physical sexuality solidified desires and emotional connections to contribute to narrators' sense of a whole self.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A “knitting together of mind and spirit”: love and family

In his magnum opus *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, the first parts of which were published in 1898, Havelock Ellis wrote that the movement for women’s emancipation was “on the whole, a wholesome and inevitable movement. But it carries with it certain disadvantages.”<sup>515</sup> The main disadvantage, in his view, was that “having been taught independence of men and disdain for the old theory which placed women in the moated grange of the home to sigh for a man who never comes, a tendency develops for women to carry this independence still farther and to find love where they find work.” While Ellis was in many ways more liberal in his acceptance of feminism than were most men of his era, he nevertheless fell prey to a common assumption about its effects: that women’s emancipation resulted for some in lesbianism. The women’s movement could not, he argued, directly cause sexual inversion, but it could “develop the germs of it.”<sup>516</sup>

In one sense, Ellis was right. The coming together of large numbers of women in the workplace, in higher education, in “bohemian” movements, and, indeed, in feminism *did* give women the opportunity to form intimate relationships with each other. As lesbians and bisexual women, or the various kinds of female “sexual inverts” as they were called in Ellis’ day, came together in same-sex environments, they were able to realize for the first time that they were not alone. The workplaces, the universities and colleges, the parties and the political groups were all sites for the establishment of same-sex relationships between women. Much as there is today at least a small grain of truth in the claim that departments of women’s studies “breed” lesbianism, in that they provide a space in which women already questioning their sexuality can find others

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<sup>515</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* Vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1937), 262.

<sup>516</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* Vol. 1, 262.

like themselves, the early twentieth-century fears about the possibility of lesbian relationships forming in single-sex environments were not completely groundless. Between the turn of the century and the interwar period, such environments became increasingly suspect in the eyes of many; for women attracted to other women, they were worlds of opportunity.

This chapter analyses female same-sex relationships between 1910 and 1965, focusing particularly on the ways in which women established and maintained relationships. I will demonstrate that the school and the workplace were important sites for the formation of relationships between women, providing as they did numerous opportunities for same-sex social contacts, the like of which disappeared for many heterosexual women upon marriage. Through these contacts, women formed both brief and long-term relationships with each other, sometimes living relatively openly within lesbian communities, but often living very closeted lives in the presence of heterosexuals.

In many ways, same-sex relationships were framed in ways similar to heterosexual ones. The rules of courtship and romance were largely the same, as lesbians and bisexual women were indoctrinated in precisely the same standards of behaviour as were heterosexual women. Relationships between women before 1965 also faced many of the same difficulties faced by heterosexual couples. The evidence discussed in this chapter reveals that, while most lesbian relationships were positive ones, abuse, both physical and verbal, was present in the lesbian community and was often linked, at least in the minds of those interviewed, to the use of alcohol and drugs. Infidelity caused grief and the end of relationships. In this regard also, some relationships between women were not necessarily very different from heterosexual relationships. What was different, of course, was the added pressure on relationships of homophobia and the consequent need to remain closeted. Relationships between women could not be lived openly without fear of reprisals, and while a life of secrecy had its own peculiar thrills, it ultimately placed great pressure on the women concerned and limited both the extent of their social worlds and the depth of their relationships with all but their partners.

This chapter also analyses women's relationships with their families of origin. I argue that, despite the presence of much more negative perceptions of homosexuality in the period under study than would begin to emerge in the 1970s, lesbians were less likely in this period to be fully ostracized by their biological families, or to voluntarily sever family relationships because of family antagonism towards their sexuality, than were lesbians of the 1970s and 1980s. This was particularly the case before the 1950s. Several factors resulted in families not rejecting lesbian daughters as forcefully as they would in later decades, and in lesbians not feeling fully able to break completely with family ties. Although there was, prior to the 1950s and 1960s, disapproval of lesbianism in Canadian society, there was not yet a widely available public discourse about it in the sense that the pejorative and medicalized discourse which would gain hegemony in the 1950s and 1960s was not yet widely used. Antipathy towards lesbians in the period before 1950 was therefore based on very vague and often gender-related terms, rather than on a pathologizing terminology of illness and dysfunction. Family reactions to lesbian daughters, while certainly based on attitudes about what was "natural" and "moral," were much less often phrased in psycho-medical discourse than they would be later in the century, allowing families perhaps to see their daughters as wayward but not as psychologically diseased. From the 1950s on, lesbianism was described, defined and policed as a psychological abnormality, and public understandings of it were increasingly informed by the new discourse.

Lesbians' reactions to family attitudes towards their sexuality were themselves mitigated by several factors. Before the postwar era, it was more difficult for many young women to survive financially without family than it would be later in the century. Many women did not work in paid employment, or did so only until marriage, when they were expected to depend financially on husbands, and there were fewer opportunities available for women who wished to live completely independently of family. There was also not yet a lesbian discourse of community and "alternative family" whereby women could visualize themselves as completely separate from their families of origin. That discourse would not arise until the lesbian-feminist

movement of the 1970s and 1980s posited the possibility of lesbian utopias and lives lived in separation both from men and from homophobic families. The evidence for this study suggests, tentatively, that except in the most extreme cases of family antipathy, lesbians in the first half of the twentieth century generally maintained greater—although still difficult—relationships with their families of origin than did lesbians in later decades.

Both family and romantic relationships, and especially those occurring early in life, bear directly on subjectivity. It is in their descriptions of their relationships with their families, and in their accounts of their first crushes on and relationships with girls or women, that one can see the development of the subjectivities of the women discussed in this study. Many of them began to form attractions towards other girls, and some began to feel that they did not fit prevailing gender norms, as young children. They were aware, all of them, that they were eventually supposed to develop relationships with boys and men, and that they were supposed to be feminine. Awareness of difference from the norm in these respects led these women to conceal from their families and the broader society those aspects of themselves they were aware would result in negative reactions. Although these women did not “come out” in a modern sense, they nevertheless gained subjectivities based on their sexuality because of the negotiation between their desires, their actions, and public notions of acceptable and unacceptable sexuality.

It is in the relationship between same-sex attractions and these women’s self-descriptions and accounts of relationships with partners and families that one sees most clearly the importance of particular life events in the narrative structures common among lesbians. Relationships are among the most important milestones or signal events in many of these stories. The first awareness of same-sex attraction taking the form of a crush on another girl or a teacher, the first exploration of that attraction in a physical sense, the first full sexual experience, the first real lesbian relationship—all of these “firsts” are remembered in considerable detail compared to other aspects of personal history. They imply the entrance of the individual into a new chapter of

subjectivity, in which an inherent aspect of self is realized consciously for the first time, or is significantly affirmed and thus reinforced.

The movement from feelings of difference without a language to express that difference, to awareness of attraction and desire to act on it, to the knowledge of a shared experience and a shared difference emerges in many of these women's stories. This chapter will assess the importance of these particular life events in the narrators' constructions of self, and will argue that lesbian narratives about relationships convey a sense of "coming home" to one's real, true, and essential sexuality. And while I do not myself agree with the view that each individual does have an innate and essential sexual orientation, I acknowledge in this chapter the importance of such narrative structure in the narrators' senses of themselves in relation to the world and in the campaigning for legal rights and social tolerance.

### **Lesbian and Bisexual Relationships in the Early Twentieth Century**

The few sources attesting to the existence of lesbian relationships in the early twentieth century, before the creation of the bar culture in Canada, come almost exclusively from the middle class. Because a public lesbian community, in the form of the bar scene, was established later in Canada than in the United States, we do not have information that would allow the kind of analysis of working-class lesbian life before 1940 that is found in the two major works in the field, Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* and Kennedy and Davis' *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*.<sup>517</sup> Our perspective on lesbian life before the rise of the bar culture in

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<sup>517</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1991); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

Canada is therefore skewed somewhat in favour of middle-class experiences and perspectives. In this first section, I examine several sets of written documents pertaining to relationships between women. These relationships all commenced before the Second World War and the women involved in them are long deceased. The documents were all written by middle-class women and reflect a distinctly middle-class perspective and language.

The collection of letters between Frieda Fraser and Bud Williams is the largest thus far in Canadian lesbian history. As mentioned in Chapters Two and Three, their relationship embodies the twentieth-century version of the middle-class romantic friendship, yet with a clearly physical element. It also reveals the emotional hardships women had to endure in order to be with one another, and it clearly illustrates the depth of lesbian passion. The Fraser-Williams relationship was emotionally effusive, physically passionate, humorous, and self-aware. The letters are replete with such terms of endearment as “my lamb,” “lambie,” and “darling.”

Writing almost daily when possible, Bud and Frieda discussed not only their jobs, friends, and family events, but also the nature of their relationship, societal attitudes towards relationships between women, their future together, and their families’ opposition to their relationship. While they do not analyse their own coming to awareness of their sexual orientation, their discussions of relationships with friends and family and the continuous expression of the terms of their own relationship reveal a sense of “rightness” and “naturalness” not unlike that expressed in the more recent oral testimonies used for this study. The Fraser-Williams letters also reveal the presence, on both sides, of subjectivity based on sexual orientation; their awareness of their difference from other women, their resistance to societal attitudes towards relationships between women, and their passionate commitment to a long-term relationship clearly indicate that they were self-aware. In this section of the chapter, I analyse both the ways in which the women write to each other and construct their relationship, and how

their relationship is defined and strengthened in the face of antagonism from others, most notably family members.<sup>518</sup>

The two women constantly flatter each other, Bud being the more expressive of the two in this regard. Writing to Frieda for her birthday in 1925, for example, Bud said “My dear - This carries my best wishes for to-morrow and all my love to you. I am quite used to your getting older as you are doing it so nicely. And it is nice to have you catch up to me again - I am not so lonely. I shall burn two candles for you to-morrow - one as a bribe for the future and one to say thank-you for the past...” She continued, flirtatiously, “I hope you’re liking the great out-of-doors - please don’t pick up a he-man!”<sup>519</sup> She would ask of Frieda, later in 1925, “Do you think we’ll get over liking each other in time? It might be simpler in heaps of ways but I couldn’t conceive of a worse calamity than to stop loving you, to look at [it] from a purely selfish point of view. O my dear, I’ve an awful lot to thank you for - especially for showing me what affection is.”<sup>520</sup> Bud’s feelings for Frieda sometimes affected the way she interacted with other people. “I like it most of the time,” she said,

because it is not enough to be really painful, but quite often I get took! It is most unexpected and rather inconvenient sometimes. I begin to be so awfully nice to people. Mollie understands so that when I kiss her when we meet in the evening and try to wait on her hand and foot, she doesn’t think that I have taken leave of my senses, but is nice and sympathetic back. But with other people, it is not so simple and makes life very much more complicated. But I’ve told you about it

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<sup>518</sup> Their relationships *with* family members are discussed more fully in the next section of the chapter. Here family members are simply a force requiring accommodation and negotiation in the relationship, but which also ultimately strengthens rather than undermining it.

<sup>519</sup> University of Toronto Archives (UTA), Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 29 August 1925.

<sup>520</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 November 1925.

before. I wish I could explain that I'm not being nice and affectionate because of any feelings I have for them but because I like someone else rather hard.<sup>521</sup>

The depth of their feelings for one another is expressed in many letters. In 1926, Bud wrote "I didn't know that it was possible to miss anyone so much, or that I could love you quite so violently. On having had it happen, I could go on doing it indefinitely without slowing down a bit." Regarding their future together, she said "The end of our second four years expires this year - what about a new base and for how long? It will be amusing to see what we are up to in another eight years - 34, Frieda! And what will we have done?"<sup>522</sup> Bud's consideration of their having a future together suggests that part of her subjectivity was based on her relationship to Frieda. Frieda also missed Bud, writing the previous year "It is a most extraordinary arrangement this system of partnership. I suppose it shows the adaptability of the human organism. I didn't realise till lately how much I need you & depend on you & still, or rather because of it I rely much more on myself than without you. Is that clear? It sounds rather cocky but it isn't very."<sup>523</sup>

In their correspondence, Frieda and Bud often spoke of their relationship in terms of a "valley", which appears to refer to an imaginary or symbolic and idyllic place in which their love is expressed fully. "Frieda dear," wrote Bud,

I've tried and tried and I can't write about the valley. I've written pages and then torn them up because they don't say at all what I mean. You are a very understanding person, but when I read it over, it doesn't convey what I mean even to me, so I don't think it would to you.<sup>524</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 29 December 1925.

<sup>522</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 04, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 6 February 1926.

<sup>523</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 06, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 10 July 1925.

<sup>524</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 28 November 1925.

Frieda had similar difficulty describing the valley, but in both cases the descriptions offer images of a tranquil and almost ethereal place in which the emotions between the two women surrounded them, communication was almost telepathic, and the criticism of others was absent. The conjuring up of such an imagined place in which to express their love might suggest to the reader a form of resistance to dominant discourse, in the sense that Frieda and Bud created for themselves an ideal world in which their love was not an issue, a world sadly lacking in their real lives.

The valley formed an important part of both their subjectivities in that it was a mutually constructed oasis in a homophobic world. This might be thought of as a couple's version of what Nan Enstad, using James C. Scott, calls a "hidden transcript," a "cultural [practice] and knowledge...not visible to those in power."<sup>525</sup> Enstad is referring to broad cultural practices on the part of subordinate groups who are denied a public voice, but the resistant subjectivities she speaks of can also generate individual practices to produce similar effects. Although created because of social marginalization, and although not a political resistance, the valley served for Frieda and Bud as both a discourse of resistance and as a vision of a different world, in which their relationship was allowed to speak its true value.

On several occasions, Bud wrote to Frieda concerning her thoughts on other women's emotional relationships. While in Britain, it seems that she grew to know several lesbian couples, some of whom she compared to herself and Frieda. Once, she wrote to Frieda:

Helen and I sat up last night until three o'clock discussing liking people, etc. I'm awfully sorry for her, the poor lamb. She likes her family quite well, but I don't think she really knows much about loving and doesn't love anyone at all. I can't think of anything worse, and yet think of the millions of people who do it. She was telling me about Esther and Lucie and how devoted they are, which even Helen couldn't miss. And they seemed to have worked it out rather well. They

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<sup>525</sup> Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, 121.

are awfully happy together and seem to consider it a permanent arrangement—at least, Lucie does, I am sure....<sup>526</sup>

Later in 1925, Bud wrote to Frieda about her friend Mollie, who one night “began to tell me about Edith Clarke, to whom she is devoted. She had never said much about her before, and that little very casually, but I had gathered that she rather liked her. However last night she embarked on the whole tale—their families don’t like it and Edith wants to come to London to be with Moll, so there is a devil of a row going on.” Bud, in response, told Mollie about her relationship with Frieda. She asked of Frieda,

Do you mind my telling Mollie? I have never wanted to talk about you at all, but when I got started, she was so interested and was rather keen to know because in some ways we are a bit farther on. They have had just the same difficulties with their families, but they really had more time before they got on their ears. Edith and M. lived together here for a bit before there was any opposition, but E. was ill and had to go back to Jamaica, and since then their families have got irate.<sup>527</sup>

The phrase “we are a bit farther on” can be interpreted in two ways. The first, obviously, is simply one of duration of the relationship, and suggests that Mollie sought Bud’s advice because Bud and Frieda’s relationship was the longer of the two. Also in evidence here, however, is a more qualitative suggestion of *experience*. Bud was able to offer Mollie her advice about family conflicts over same-sex relationships because she and Frieda had gained considerable experience in this area in the preceding years. Bud’s acknowledgement of this experience and of her capacity as an advisor should be taken to reveal an awareness of the nature of her relationship with Frieda and of its contradiction of dominant norms. In her conversation with Mollie, Bud acted as self-aware sage or elder stateswoman for relationships between women. Here Bud acknowledged her own subjectivity by conceiving of herself as someone able to give advice on

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<sup>526</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 5 November 1925.

<sup>527</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 14 December 1925.

same-sex relationships, and that subjectivity was affirmed by Mollie's acceptance of her expertise on the subject.

It would appear that in late 1925, Bud and Frieda toyed with the idea of Frieda forming another relationship in Bud's absence. Bud had suggested that Frieda get to know a woman called Gwyn. Bud was initially surprised at the connection that was made between the two, writing "I'm glad you think she is lovely - I do, of course, but I'm always afraid that it is because I like her so much, and discount something. But I was not prepared to find you so impressed...."<sup>528</sup> She further commented,

I'm thrilled to death that you could love Gwyn - please do! I can't think of a nicer combination of people and it would be so nice for me...I couldn't ask for anything more than to have Gwyn my successor, and to be loved by you is the best thing I could wish for her. O my darling, how pleasant it would be!...My darling lamb, the more I think of you and Gwyn, the nicer it is - do manage it, please!<sup>529</sup>

Whatever Bud's statements of encouragement, it is clear that she was not necessarily very pleased about Frieda meeting someone else. While wishing Frieda happiness, and thus being willing to be "succeeded," Bud became personally rather insecure when it appeared that a close relationship between Frieda and Gwyn might in fact occur. She began to see in Frieda's behaviour changes which might or might not have occurred, the cause of which was the relationship with Gwyn. Her concerns are revealed in a further letter in which she asks

Is there anything the matter? The last little bit, you have been different when I have come to see you. Is it that my successor is in sight? You are just as nice as ever, but a little taken up with something that you're not letting me in on. If it is my successor, I am quite prepared to love her too, even if it isn't Gwyn.<sup>530</sup>

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<sup>528</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 18 November 1925.

<sup>529</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 25 November 1925.

In time, Bud and Frieda realized that Gwyn was critical of their relationship. Bud reported to Frieda that “apart from your being a friend of mine, she likes you, but her whole idea of you is somewhat distorted by the peculiar idea she has of our friendship. You are leading me into all sorts of evil, and I am being stupid not to see it. I’m so sorry for her - isn’t it a pity she is such an idiot about it?”<sup>531</sup> She further revealed that “it is all based on the fact that it isn’t natural for young women to be devoted to each other.”<sup>532</sup> Gwyn commented negatively on the relationship on several occasions, and her perspective was similar to that of each woman’s family and to dominant attitudes about intimate relationships between women being unhealthy and unnatural.

Frieda and Bud commented frequently on other people’s reactions to their relationship, their comments revealing that they had a sure sense of themselves and their relationship and that they remained proud of that relationship, regardless of other people’s opinions. They are sharply critical of the prevailing views about relationships between women, and frequently remark on the stupidity of the opposition. Frieda remarked, “Our not being popular is probably due to two things a) people feel left out b) it is against nature.” She went on to state: “a) we have done our best [to] rule out & there is no arguing over b) All of which leaves us at the starting point.”<sup>533</sup> It was Bud who commented more frequently, however. She lamented in 1926 that

I haven’t the remotest idea of what will be the result of all the fuss about us. It can’t be any worse than it has been, can it? Perhaps in time—20 yrs or so—people will get tired of it and leave us in peace. That is the most we can hope for. I don’t suppose they’ll be enthusiastic about us even in 100 yrs. However it

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<sup>530</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 28 November 1925.

<sup>531</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 05, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 13 July 1926.

<sup>532</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 05, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 20 July 1926.

<sup>533</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 08, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 27 March 1926.

hasn't made any difference really—we had to exercise tact and discretion, but it hasn't made any difference to our being devoted to each other, really, has it? It is such a delightfully secure feeling to think that various people have been awfully down on it and done their best to spoil it—and they were the ones who could bring more pressure to bear than anyone else—and yet it is still there more than ever. My lamb, aren't you proud of us?<sup>534</sup>

Bud's statements here clearly indicate that, even though the two women were not part of a public lesbian culture and did not use the "sexual invert" terminology of the day in which to express an identity, they nevertheless resisted the dominant discourse and all attempts to separate them and to deny the validity of their relationship. Bud suggested that their having to "exercise tact and discretion"—to monitor their behaviour around others and to be careful how openly they expressed affection—had not affected the quality of their relationship or their commitment to each other. Bud also took pride in their having resisted the forceful pressure of family antagonism.

Bud's complaints about the treatment the two had received and the general absurdity of people's disapproval should not be taken to indicate that she was in favour of all same-sex relationships, however. In an earlier letter she wrote "I think I see exactly what everyone objects to about us, and I'm not sure that I don't agree with them usually, but I am convinced that we are an exception."<sup>535</sup> Unfortunately, Bud does not elaborate on those aspects of the relationship that she might, in others, see as less than desirable. It could be that Bud, who was not in favour of the extremely masculine appearance of some women, might have been commenting on the kind of relationships between women described by such sexologists as Havelock Ellis and increasingly in evidence in England in the 1920s, to which the appellation "sexual inversion" might readily be applied. Many a lesbian in this era sought to distance herself from the

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<sup>534</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 04, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 19 June 1926.

<sup>535</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 04, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 28 May 1926.

pathological terminology of the sexologists, even while others—most notably Radclyffe Hall—were embracing it.<sup>536</sup>

Bud's loquacity on the subject of their relationship varied in relation to her assessment of the degree of tolerance of other people. Based on others' reactions to the subject, or their likely reactions, she tailored her information to the particular situation. This should suggest to us that Bud's subjectivity included an awareness of the ways in which her relationship with Frieda contravened dominant norms, and that she sought to preserve and protect the relationship by being circumspect in some situations. Silence under prohibition is a very strong statement of subjectivity. For example, in 1925 Bud was talking to her friend Helen about relationships. When Helen remarked that "it must be nice to have someone to whom it mattered whether you were there or not," Bud said that she thought it was. "Then she said something about you and me," Bud wrote to Frieda:

That we hit it off quite well, and I found that all I could do was agree. I simply couldn't say more or talk about you at all; because she wouldn't understand and it seemed so indecent; although I had said quite a lot about you to the nice Miss Brown coming over on the boat. I thought I had got to the point where I could chat about you now, but I find I can't.<sup>537</sup>

Returning to Canada to visit Frieda in 1926, Bud wrote "I'm so thrilled at everything I'm nearly in a fit. One old boy that I love on the boat wants to know why I'm so thrilled about getting home and I can't explain that it's because I'm going to telephone you tomorrow night!"<sup>538</sup> Had it been a husband or boyfriend Bud was returning to, she probably would have felt comfortable

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<sup>536</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 322. Lesbians objected to Hall's portrayal of her main character as a congenital invert and suggested that it showed homosexuality in a poor light.

<sup>537</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 November 1925.

<sup>538</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 04, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 27 June 1926.

expressing her excitement; that she did not do so reveals that she knew what would be the probable reaction to the knowledge that it was another woman she was so excited to see.

Attitudes towards women's relationships sometimes caused the two women considerable mirth. Bud asked Frieda,

Did I tell you about our maid and your letters? I always get one from you now on Monday morning and she always puts it on top and says with an arch air "Here's your letter, Miss" when she brings them up. And if one comes any other time, she says "Here's an extra one this week," and I have been quite amused by it. But one day she came in for something in the evening when I had been out with Hugh and she gave me a little maternal advice about going out with him so much when there was that man of mine - that doctor - in N.Y. writing to me so regular and me writing to him too! I was so amused that I could hardly restrain my shouts of laughter, but I carefully addressed the next letter that I gave her to post to Dr. Frieda H. Fraser, and nothing has been said since. Aren't you entertained?<sup>539</sup>

That Bud appreciated that their relationship could easily be seen for what it was is indicated by her comment "I found a nice dedication in a book to-day 'To those who believe that life was made for friendship.' But according to most of our friends we are not in that class, are we? Wouldn't we be counted as too abandoned?"<sup>540</sup> Bud's letters to Frieda suggest a resistance to societal attitudes and a belief that their love would survive social pressures. Discussing their future together, Bud acknowledged in 1926 that "I suppose there would be hell raised if we tried to live together."<sup>541</sup>

Frieda, who was generally a much more reserved person than Bud, was rather less inclined to comment on people's attitudes than was Bud, but she did on one occasion describe an

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<sup>539</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 04, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 9 January 1926.

<sup>540</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 04, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, n.d.

<sup>541</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 04, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 27 March 1926.

afternoon tea she had attended: “I went to tea at Gertrude Graden’s and found myself suddenly in a rare & intellectual atmosphere. I was immediately introduced to & sat down beside an active middle aged woman with an air whose opening remark was ‘Tell me about the contraceptive clinics in Toronto.’” Quite how the conversation turned to the subject of women’s relationships is unclear, but Frieda commented “The problem that seems to be in their minds at the moment was the everlasting odd women. I wonder if there are enough of them to warrant all the fuss & if they are necessarily abnormal or unhappy or mentally deformed.”<sup>542</sup>

Here Frieda seems to be commenting that society had blown the magnitude of the “problem” out of all proportion and also that the assumptions about “odd women” were, in her view, incorrect.<sup>543</sup> While Frieda may not herself have identified as an “odd” woman, her refutation of the pathologization of such women can be seen as an example of her own self-awareness and her resistance to the assumption that relationships between women were unhealthy, because lesbians were among those thought “odd.” Frieda’s construction of a lesbian subjectivity was formed in opposition to the assumptions of her family, acquaintances, and society at large that her relationship with Bud was abnormal. In resisting and rejecting such messages, she both expressed and intensified her own subjectivity. While not a political act, in the same way that publicly campaigning against the pathologization of women’s relationships would have been, Frieda’s resistance nevertheless rests upon a strongly-held view of self and of the rightness of that self.

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<sup>542</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 07, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 7 February 1926.

<sup>543</sup> “Odd women” could be lesbians, spinsters, or “New Women.” The term describes those women who did not conform to prevailing gender norms and norms of sexuality, and who were noticed by and were of concern to heterosexual and gender-normative society. Such terms were often used to define and pathologize those women whose gender and sexual nonconformity made them unusual to broader society and whose politics often made them a threat as well.

A few months earlier, Frieda had told Bud that she had been reading accounts of the lives of Lady Hamilton and Elizabeth Blackwell. She remarked that:

I'm interested to find in the former that apparently all would have been forgiven if the public had not been forced to be aware of what was going on. They "offended against good taste" in not making a pretense of hushing things up. Is it that they were being made a party to the lapse by officially being aware of it?<sup>544</sup>

This is an interesting social commentary, in which Frieda suggests that one of the main public objections to open relationships between women might have been that they required the public's awareness of lesbian sexuality. The public distaste, she implies, may have been about the openness of things thought unseemly for public consumption.

A letter of 1926 reveals Frieda being unusually voluble on the subject of societal attitudes, and heteronormativity in particular. Her letter reveals a mix of scientific inquiry, condemnation of critical analysis of social pressures, and knowledge of Freudian ideas. The beginning of the letter has been lost, unfortunately, so we may not know what incident may have sparked this unusually long commentary. Frieda remarked to Bud that "there is an outrageously high value put on the passion of men for women & women for men." She then entered into a lengthy discussion of biologically-based ideas of "natural" and appropriate human sexual behaviour. Bringing to the fore her training as a scientist, she told Bud that

When you consider that originally the motive force in question was intrinsically an intermittent mechanism & that now when the need for it is biologically dropping to an extremely low level people keep harping on it as though it were a constantly necessary factor for a normal existence it seems damned silly of them not to say perverse.

No one thinks it indecent of the bees & ants to have developed what is virtually an intersex. In fact they are highly respected. And they do it on the basis of political economy or social hygiene. Imagine what a scandal if some of the workers forgot themselves! And there it seems to be simply a matter of being

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<sup>544</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 10, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 6 December 1926.

interested in something else; which a philosopher might call self sacrifice or self control for the communal good but which a biologist would call a tropism.

d) Moreover to be truly womanly, take yours truly (generally allowed to be within normal limits even if barely), if one of the ruling instincts of the world is so feeble that in 26 years it has only called attention to itself by my wanting to pat the hair of or kiss the tops of the heads of men engaged in looking down microscopes when I see them from the top, I can't bring myself to take it too seriously.

Of course one could argue a) that I'm setting up a resistance to it a la Freud—allowing that if it is all it is cracked up to be it should surely be strong enough to break down that much.

Or b) that people like me are abnormal. But in that case, though there is no defense, one would have to admit that they manage to rub along in fair numbers.<sup>545</sup>

Frieda's sharp criticism of social norms reveals both awareness of general antipathy towards same-sex relationships and a resistance to that homophobia and also to prevailing gender norms. She clearly regards biological arguments about heterosexuality being for the survival of the species as superfluous in an era when there did not exist the same biological need for reproduction as had previously been the case. Her comments on intersex among insects illustrates the influence of early twentieth-century definitions of a "third sex." While it is impossible to determine with certainty whether or not she would have placed herself in the category of a third sex, it can be said that she was fully aware and was accepting of her own gender non-conformity. She acknowledges that she is "within normal limits" of womanliness, but her addition of the phrase "even if barely" demonstrates an awareness of her lack of femininity in the traditional sense. That she linked this discussion to her own personal experience at least suggests that Frieda was aware of and comfortable with her own, unfeminine gender performance.

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<sup>545</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 9, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, n.d. 1926?

It is clear from this letter that Frieda took philosophical and scientific issue with biological and Freudian notions of the naturalness of heterosexuality. Her comments regarding ruling instincts and Freud demonstrate that she found fault with the argument that heterosexuality was the driving human force, because in Frieda's case it had little effect beyond the occasional desire to kiss a man affectionately. Countering Freud, Frieda suggested that any force that is natural and strong should easily be able to counter any resistance.

The letters between Frieda and Bud indicate that, for them, societal attitudes towards relationships between women were simultaneously amusing, irritating, and oppressive. Their sense of humour about the issue allowed them to defuse some of the stress involved in continuing their relationship in the face of disapproval. Apart from their families and close friends, however, it does not seem that many people knew of the nature of their relationship. It is because of this that Frieda was able to sit quietly at the afternoon tea and listen to the assembled guests discuss "the everlasting odd women," without them being any the wiser that an odd woman was in their presence. And it was not until Bud made it clear by addressing an envelope to "Dr. Frieda H. Fraser" rather than to "Dr. F.H. Fraser" that it occurred to her maid that she might be writing to a woman.<sup>546</sup>

Frieda and Bud found some measure of support among their closest friends, many of whom were similarly "devoted" to women. Others were simply less homophobic than society at large. Their mutual friend Bunny was particularly supportive. In 1926, for example, when Bud was missing Frieda terribly, she expressed to Bunny the desire to quit her job in London and find one in Philadelphia, where Frieda was working. Bunny said to her "Why don't you? You know you could get a job anywhere." Bud wrote to Frieda "I was mildly astonished that she thought it would be a good idea but I didn't pursue it further as she went on to say that we got on so well

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<sup>546</sup> It should be noted that the custom of the day was that a male doctor would use initials, whereas a woman would put her first name. It was perhaps Bud's use of Frieda's initials when addressing letters that was the more unusual, rather than the maid's "ignorance."

that it was a pity we couldn't live together." Bunny then said to Bud, "Frieda kept thinking all the time we were in Bermuda that it was a pity it wasn't you." Bud later regretted her response, which fortunately did not offend Bunny: "I made the most dreadful remark at which Bunny shouted with laughter and said that I wasn't blest with modesty. Please I said it quite without thinking and I'm sorry I've disgraced you. It was 'Poor dear - I'm sorry it was so bad that she let it show.'"<sup>547</sup> Here again is an indication of Bud's self-knowledge about the importance and depth of their relationship; just as someone in a long-term heterosexual relationship might have been aware that they were the most important person in the world to their partner, so too was Bud aware of the depth of Frieda's love for her.

The Fraser-Williams relationship, although physical and otherwise qualitatively different from the romantic friendships of the nineteenth century, employed an effusive language of love and devotion not dissimilar to that of the passionate friends described by Lillian Faderman and others. Among middle-class women of the early twentieth century, this type of passionate and highly effusive language was not uncommon, and indicates the maintenance of at least some of the aspects of the romantic friendship even in decades supposedly after such relationships had become unacceptable. As Martha Vicinus indicates, romantic friendships continued to exist well into the twentieth century, despite the new condemnation of such relationships as unnatural.<sup>548</sup> Twenty years after Frieda and Bud were writing to each other, middle-class women were still using the high-flown language of the romantic friendship. The relationship of Charlotte Whitton and Margaret Grier is a case in point. While formed initially in the transition period of the 1920s, their relationship endured well into the period of more negative attitudes towards

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<sup>547</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 05, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 11 August 1926.

<sup>548</sup> Martha Vicinus, "'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong': The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity," in *Lesbian Subjects: A Feminist Studies Reader*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 244.

relationships between women, and of new ways of describing such relationships. The Whitton-Grier relationship continued to be expressed in terms more customary in the nineteenth century.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, Margaret Grier died in late 1947. After her death, Charlotte Whitton wrote ninety-six letters “to” Margaret, enclosed in two volumes that she named “Molly Mugwamp Makes Believe.” Whether or not “Molly Mugwamp” was a nickname Whitton had had prior to Grier’s death is unclear. The volumes represent Whitton’s attempt to come to terms with her grief and with her guilt, the latter for not having been at Grier’s side when she died. In these letters, one can see the depth of this relationship which lasted thirty years and, in Whitton’s mind at least, was to have been a lifelong one.

The Whitton-Grier letters take the reader on a journey through Whitton’s pain as she processed the death of her partner. On the eve of 1948, while Whitton was on a train to Edmonton, she wrote a lengthy letter to Grier in which she said “This will be the first of the New and Empty Years in which I shall go on alone.” She continued:

Mardie, Mardie, Mardie [Margaret’s nickname], I don’t yet understand what numbing of my will let them keep me here that Friday night...I gambled and you died without me. Mardie, they tell me of the light in your eyes when they said you would hear my voice. You and God know the light and peace I denied you by not getting into that room and clasping your poor, beaten body. Oh! Mardie! Mardie, how can I go on? Ours wasn’t love: it was a knitting together of mind and spirit: it was something given to few by God: there wasn’t anything silly or weak or slaving: it was just that our minds and spirits marched so together that they were the same in two different bodies...O Mardie, my heart will beat on but all the years, I will walk always with you beside me and this void, this void forever until I too go hence.<sup>549</sup>

In this quotation we can see the weaving together of the themes of loyalty and devotion so common to the romantic friendship, and a placing of their love above the earthly. Whitton clearly separates what lay between them from ordinary love when she says not only that it was given to them by God, but also that it was not “silly or weak or slaving.” Given that Whitton

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<sup>549</sup> National Archives of Canada (NAC), MG30 E256, vol. 133, “Molly Mugwamp Makes Believe,” vol. 1, Charlotte Whitton to Margaret Grier, New Year’s Eve, 1947-1948.

was often prone to be rather judgmental about those human instincts she would have regarded as base, this statement surely suggests that she thought their love to be noble and beyond reproach, and not “basely” sexual. In March of 1948, she wrote

Darling: Midnight again and the busy world hushed and just you and I alone together again. O my dearest dear three months gone this early dawn you have been and I left you to die with strangers. Agnes and Grace are both fine but O Mardie, how terrible it must have been for you, knowing, and how you loved me, that I was letting you down: you see I hoped against hope.<sup>550</sup>

Keenly aware of the date on which her beloved died, Whitton wrote in May, “Darling: Five months ago today! O Mardie I look at your picture, I look at your dear kinky handwriting and I tell myself over and over that you are dead, you, my gracious, gentle radiant Mardie, and I can’t believe it.”<sup>551</sup> 1948 was a difficult year for Whitton, and all of the letters from that year in some way express her grief at Grier’s death. The level of torment expressed in the letters, the permanence of the relationship as envisaged by Whitton, and the poetic nature of her language reveal not only the consciousness of a relationship the equivalent of a marriage, but also an emotional and linguistic content very similar to that of relationships between many other famous “romantic friends.”

Whitton’s relationship with Grier followed on from and was expressed in similar terms to her early twentieth-century relationships at university, where she clearly was engaged in the kind of relationships between university women about which Havelock Ellis and others were so concerned.<sup>552</sup> Whether or not those relationships were physical is something we cannot know; from the letters quoted in this chapter, we can see that the Whitton-Grier relationship embodied

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<sup>550</sup> NAC, MG30 E256, vol. 133, “Molly Mugwamp Makes Believe,” vol. 1, Charlotte Whitton to Margaret Grier, 9 March 1948.

<sup>551</sup> NAC, MG30 E256, vol. 133, “Molly Mugwamp Makes Believe,” vol. 1, Charlotte Whitton to Margaret Grier, 9 May 1948.

<sup>552</sup> Discussed in Chapter Three.

other aspects of the romantic friendship, such as devotion, religious and spiritual imagery, and a poetic and expressive language.<sup>553</sup>

In several letters which reveal both the continued use, in the 1940s, of the very hyperbolic language of previous decades and the influence of new ideas about same-sex relationships, Bunny Norcrop expressed her devotion to Elisabeth Govan. In 1945, “Bunny” wrote to “Betty”

Something has lasted all these years better than we ever dreamed it would...What is it, darling?...What do you think? I think—and know—that one of the things is my joy in the way your steady old head works...Another thing is the spring from which your vitality and enthusiasm and joy in living [springs] forth. Very sweet clear water...You really aren't any more impervious to feelings than I am...and we're old and wise enough now to assess things like that quite accurately, aren't we?...It has moved out of the pathological pitfall it fell into just at first because of my need then...and now?...such a very tender affection my Betty...so very dear and to be cherished, now more than ever.<sup>554</sup>

Precisely what Bunny meant by “pathological pitfall” is unclear. It could be that she simply meant that she had at first been quite obsessed with Elisabeth and perhaps a little too clingy. It could be that they had initially had a physical relationship but had withdrawn from it because of their knowledge that such relationships were regarded as abnormal, and they wished not be classified, or to have to think of themselves, in relation to the lesbians who were becoming the subject of increasing public discourse. Whichever is the case, Bunny's use of the word “pathological” illustrates the influence of psychology and of notions of normal and abnormal, healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Whatever the physical content of their relationship, Bunny appears to have felt that her relationship with Betty was very spiritual as well as emotional, and that the two had a remarkable connection despite the fact that they spent very little time together in the same city. She wrote:

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<sup>553</sup> The degree to which the letters might imply a physical relationship is explored in Chapter Three.

<sup>554</sup> UTA, Elisabeth Steel Livingston Govan Papers, B79-0027, Box 3, File 4, letter, Bunny Norcrop to Elisabeth Govan, n.d., 1945?

Dear Betty-boy...I only wanted to listen, and look at you, and feel your presence...and any words of mine were rightly inserted edgewise...You always go away from me...that is the pattern for us apparently...but I still feel you, my dearly beloved child, right to my fingertips. It is a miracle sort of thing that has...in the words of King James...been vouchsafed unto us...It has a religious quality...perhaps I mean transcendent quality...and it makes me love the world even more dearly than before...and feel safer, and freer, and surer. I'm saying all this again because it still overwhelms me...and yet, had I the faith about which the church preaches, I might have accepted the thing as ordinary. But how blasé...! Supposing I had had that very reaction...you would have turned from me in disgust, and I wouldn't have known enough to be disgusted with myself. Thank God for our emotional health, my Betty, and for the mental capacity we both have to recognize a miracle when it happens.<sup>555</sup>

Here again is the language of the romantic friendship, still present in the 1940s, and particularly the linking of a relationship with religion. But here also is an expression of subjectivity, for the phrase “to recognize a miracle” suggests that Bunny, if not both partners, acknowledged what was between them as a deeply intimate relationship and even thought it to be divinely inspired.

Bunny knew well the possible consequences of her relationship, commenting, “I suppose we can't avoid the usual implications of the conservative school...the biddies who frown upon close attachments between women.” Before meeting Betty, Bunny knew that she was not going to fulfil society's expectations of her as a woman. “I faced the prospect of matrimony once,” she said, “and decided with a cool sort of half logical knowledge, that I would never be able to face the drudge, nor [be] able to measure up to the usual expectations...and once that was decided the rest has been easy...lacking in conflict, I mean.”<sup>556</sup> Here Bunny expresses the feeling of “rightness” and “naturalness” present in so many lesbian accounts: once she had decided that marriage, the usual path of womanhood, was not for her, emotions of conflict disappeared. She became comfortable with herself and was able to live her life more fully. While the same

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<sup>555</sup> UTA, Elisabeth Steel Livingston Govan Papers, B79-0027, Box 3, File 4, letter, Bunny Norcrop to Elisabeth Govan, n.d.

<sup>556</sup> UTA, Elisabeth Steel Livingston Govan Papers, B79-0027, Box 3, File 4, letter, Bunny Norcrop to Elisabeth Govan, n.d.

opinion could easily be expressed by a heterosexual woman who decided to remain unmarried, its expression in this context, in a letter concerning her relationship with Betty, should surely suggest that she was also referring to her commitment to women rather than to men.

Several of Bunny's letters reveal that she missed Betty greatly. In November 1945, she lamented,

I wish you were here. We'd hop up to Pender Harbour and walk in our cedary wood, and paddle on lost lakes and wet a line in the salt sea...every so often I want you with me rather desperately. Your letter was good - and I am completely satisfied, for a little space of time, anyway....<sup>557</sup>

Later that month, she told Betty that a friend had said to her, "out of a completely serene sky... 'You know, it would be a good thing for you to go to the East for a year...' But you will be in Chicago, so why should I?...except, if I am ever to have a degree, I'd rather get it in Toronto than here." Money was of concern to her, however: "I'm an extravagant hussy and would find it awfully hard to endure student poverty," she said. "Would you guarantee me one good meal a week? I could pay it off when you finally get to B.C. [drawing of happy face]- But this sort of chatter is dangerous...."<sup>558</sup>

Women who contemplated lives without men, lives lived together as couples, were clearly outside the bounds of heteronormativity. And yet they persevered. In these passages from twentieth-century love letters, one sees the continuation of several themes common to nineteenth-century relationships between women: love, loyalty, and intense devotion. Writing more of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, Lillian Faderman argues that

Women who were romantic friends were everything to each other. They lived to be together. They thought of each other constantly. They made each other deliriously happy or horribly miserable by the increase or abatement of their

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<sup>557</sup> UTA, Elisabeth Steel Livingston Govan Papers, B79-0027, Box 3, File 4, letter, Bunny Norcrop to Elisabeth Govan, 8 November 1945.

<sup>558</sup> UTA, Elisabeth Steel Livingston Govan Papers, B79-0027, Box 3, File 4, letter, Bunny Norcrop to Elisabeth Govan, 19 November 1945.

proffered love. They were jealous of other female friends (and certainly of male friends) who impinged on their beloved's time or threatened to carry away a portion of her affections. They vowed that if it were at all possible they would someday live together, or at least die together, and they declared that both eventualities would be their greatest happiness. They embraced and kissed and walked hand in hand, and some even held each other all night in sleep. But unless they were transvestites or considered "unwomanly" in some male's conception, there was little chance that their relationship would be considered lesbian.<sup>559</sup>

The letters between Frieda and Bud, from Charlotte to Margaret, and from Bunny to Betty fulfil several of the above requirements of romantic friendship. While none of these women suggested that they would die together, there is nevertheless a similar degree of hyperbole in the language they used to describe their emotions for each other, a similar sense of permanent commitment, and an identical need for constant contact and communication. As I have suggested in Chapter One, this language was not peculiar to lesbian relationships, but rather was a twentieth-century version of middle- and upper-class courtship language of earlier centuries. In each of these relationships, the love between the women is invested with a religious or spiritual significance, and the women place their love above more mundane or earthly loves. This does not necessarily mean that they rejected physical love, often assumed to be earthly, but rather that they invested each and every aspect of their relationships, including physical affection, with a spiritual meaning.

The use of romantic language should not only be taken to illustrate the depth of these women's emotions towards each other, however. It also indicates very clearly the presence of lesbian subjectivities. That these women expressed devotion and lifelong commitment, that they portrayed their relationships as divinely inspired, and that they interacted with each other as spouses, shows that they conceived of their relationships as permanent and as deeper than simple friendships. For one to conceive of a same-sex relationship in such terms, one must be aware of one's own preference for one's own sex, one must be prepared to follow that preference rather

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<sup>559</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 84.

than conforming to heteronormativity, and one must be prepared to preserve that relationship by whatever means necessary in a heteronormative world. While these women at no time said to each other or to anyone else “we are lesbians,” they clearly had subjectivities formed on the basis of their same-sex desires and relationships.

New in twentieth-century love letters between women is an awareness of societal disapproval of relationships between women, something that was not present in the true era of the romantic friendship, when such relationships were regarded as a legitimate and positive element of a young woman’s development, especially insofar as the friendship trained her in the ideal values of marriage. New also is the physicality of the language; the Fraser-Williams and the Whitton letters in particular reveal a physical aspect to the relationships that went beyond the limits described by Faderman in the above passage. Perhaps most important of all, however, is the moderate infiltration of such words as “unnatural” and “libidinal,” which surely indicates the influence of sexological and Freudian ways of conceptualizing relationships. These are medical and psychological rather than moral terms, ones which were not used about romantic friends in their heyday before 1850.<sup>560</sup>

That some women were able to blend the norms of the romantic friendship with newer ideas about physical relationships between women should suggest to us that we are not necessarily discussing two completely different kinds of relationship between women: non-sexual and sexualized. Rather, it suggests that it was the language which had changed rather than the content of the relationships. As stated in Chapter Three, I disagree with Faderman’s assertion that earlier relationships were probably not genital in nature. I think, instead, that it

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<sup>560</sup> As previously mentioned, the word “libidinal” was not used before the early twentieth century, when psychological discourse began to be influential. References to same-sex relationships as “unnatural” or as “against nature” were much older, but began to be deployed much more widely from the middle of the nineteenth century, when sexual behaviour was linked more clearly to biological paradigms than previously.

was merely the language of expression and description which moved from one disguising physical content of relationships to one addressing it, albeit still obliquely.

Conti Grey Swartz, who was bisexual in her desires and in her early exploration of relationships, if not in her view of herself, wrote little of the content of her relationships with women. Her intimate relationships with women occurred at an early point in her life and appear to have been rather more brief than her relationships with men, which may account for the lack of information about their emotional aspects. In addition, it would appear that, rather than going into great detail in her journals about the positive side of relationships, Conti used her journals to examine the more difficult aspects of life. The personal relationships she discusses are often ones in which there was some conflict occurring that Conti needed to work out. It was her relationships with men and her family, it would seem, that caused her the greatest difficulty. It is therefore not possible to evaluate the level of her emotional commitment to women in a way equivalent to an analysis of the relationships of Frieda and Bud, Charlotte and Margaret, or Elisabeth and Bunny.

In a recent thesis, Nancy Olson has examined the life and identity of Alexis Amelia Alvey, an English-Canadian woman who served with the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service from 1942 to 1945. Olson argues, correctly, that Alvey was a lesbian, although she acknowledges that Alvey's identity was unstable and that the Alvey collection contains no explicit statement of that identity, nor of a physical sexuality. As Olson argues, it is in the phrasing of the letters between Alvey and her partner, Grace Brodie, and in their joint life that one recognizes her lesbianism.<sup>561</sup> Olson remarks in her thesis that "Brodie's correspondence to Alvey...is full of terms of endearment, censored by Alvey as being too personal. There are passages blacked out, though still legible, that demonstrate a physical affection that goes beyond

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<sup>561</sup> Nancy Olson, "Assembling A Life: The (Auto)biography of Alexis Amelia Alvey, 1942-1945," M.A. Thesis (Simon Fraser University (1998), 64-65.

the chaste nature of a romantic friendship.”<sup>562</sup> Other material has been removed entirely by the cutting off of portions of the letters.

I concur with Olson’s finding that Alvey’s relationship with Brodie was lesbian, regardless of the question of its physicality. The letters contain many terms of endearment, the most frequent of which are “Belovedest” and “Own Darling.” Brodie wrote effusively, many of her letters revealing her love for Alvey. In October of 1942, during a trip to Vancouver, Brodie wrote to Alvey “They showed me into a huge room, over looking the harbour and Stanley Park - which would be perfect, if you were here to share it with me.”<sup>563</sup>

As Olson indicates, respectability was very important to Alvey, and that importance accounts in part for her censorship of the letters, but also for her construction of the collection, in which she emphasised gentility.<sup>564</sup> Her concern about maintaining a respectable reputation can be seen in her desire to live a dutiful and proper life in the military. On 8 December 1942, Brodie advised Alvey “Had your lovely long letter too, which has raised 1000 questions in my mind! I would certainly go out a bit with Russell, she being the discreet person you know her to be. Certainly she will respect your position and you might get away without anyone knowing about it.” Before including this letter in the collection, Alvey had written a small side-bar in which she identified the person as a WREN rating and commented that “Officers were not to consort with ratings.”<sup>565</sup> It would appear that this was an ordinary friendship, but Alvey was concerned about it being known that she was friendly with someone of lesser status.

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<sup>562</sup> Nancy Olson, “Assembling A Life,” 66, n. 49. Brodie did not keep Alvey’s letters, and thus the correspondence is one-sided. It is nevertheless apparent that this was a very passionate relationship on both sides.

<sup>563</sup> University of British Columbia Special Collections, AII B2, Alexis A. Alvey Papers, Grace Brodie to Alexis Alvey, 5 October 1942.

<sup>564</sup> Nancy Olson, “Assembling A Life,” 49 & 71.

<sup>565</sup> University of British Columbia Special Collections, AII B2, Alexis A. Alvey Papers, Grace Brodie to Alexis Alvey, 8 December 1942.

Alvey's concern about keeping up appearances can also be seen in her management of the collection itself. Not only was she concerned during the war years to behave in an appropriate manner, she also was later concerned to remove from the letters anything that might reveal the most intimate parts of her relationship with Brodie. Her excisions are interesting, given that the text, in many cases, remains partially visible, and given that other parts of the letters, not blacked out, are equally suggestive to the modern reader.<sup>566</sup> For example, Alvey chose to include a letter in which Brodie wrote "when I meet you I'm going to be overcome by this efficient, important Third Officer."<sup>567</sup>

As Olson reveals, Alvey's attempts to maintain a respectable façade during the war years were eventually unsuccessful. The very close relationship between Alvey and Brodie, and Alvey's masculinity, were enough eventually to set off alarm bells in the administration.<sup>568</sup> Canada's military, and indeed society at large, was becoming more adept as the 1940s wore on at identifying "odd women." During the war, somewhat masculine women might be excusable given the nature of their employment and their wearing of military uniforms; in the postwar era, masculine gender performance and behaviour would not be tolerated.

In Alvey one sees a more conflicted subjectivity based on sexual orientation than one sees in other relationships discussed in this chapter. Respectability was important to all the women whose relationships I have discussed thus far, but for Alvey it was important enough to affect her later portrayal of her relationship with Brodie. Whereas the requirement for "tact and discretion" affected the behaviour of Bud and Frieda, of Charlotte and Margaret, and of Elisabeth

<sup>566</sup> The blacked out portions are not given here, for reasons of confidentiality. The collection was donated to Special Collections in 1988.

<sup>567</sup> University of British Columbia Special Collections, AII B2, Alexis A. Alvey Papers, Grace Brodie to Alexis Alvey, 18 December 1942.

<sup>568</sup> Alvey's military experiences will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

and Bunny, insofar as they were unable to publicly express their emotions for one another, in Alvey the dedication to respectability compromised her willingness to leave untouched the contents of the letters as late as 1988, when they were donated to Special Collections at the University of British Columbia and she could reasonably have surmised that her relationship with Brodie would not have been viewed as negatively as it would have when the letters were written.

Alvey's management of the collection, and especially her censorship but inclusion of Brodie's letters, suggests an internal conflict between her sexuality, her notions of class and respectability, and her desire to have her story recorded for posterity. While it must be acknowledged that she did not resist the dominant discourse to the same degree as Frieda and Bud, and thus remain unrepentant about and proud of her relationship with Brodie, she also did not completely remove that part of her life from public consumption. Brodie is present, even if she is muted by Alvey's censorship. Alvey's narrative is therefore a conflicted one, in which she attempts to include and negotiate between two very important parts of herself.

Each of the collections discussed in this section was preserved for several decades before being submitted to an archival repository. The Frieda Fraser and Bud Williams letters were preserved by Frieda until her death and then were submitted to the University of Toronto Archives by family members. Conti Grey Swartz and Elisabeth Govan kept their private papers until their deaths, after which they were archived.<sup>569</sup> And in the case of the Whitton-Grier correspondence and the Alvey-Brodie papers, it was one of the authors who donated the

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<sup>569</sup> The Swartz papers were recovered from garbage in 1988 by an historian, Richard Mackie, working part-time as a garbage collector on Pender Island, British Columbia. A friend of Constance reports that her possessions had been held by a friend at the time of Constance's death. The friend eventually contacted the friend's brother and said that she wanted the papers destroyed, but that the family should check them first. When Richard Mackie recognized the historical value of the collection, Constance's family and friends decided to submit the material to the provincial archives. Some very personal material was first destroyed. Letter, D. S. to Karen Duder, 1 March 1997. I am indebted to Richard Mackie for having brought this collection to my attention.

materials to archives. That these women kept love letters, journals, and other documents revealing same-sex relationships and did not destroy them suggests the presence of subjectivities in which those relationships were important. All would have known that their papers would be pored over by family members upon their deaths, yet they chose to retain them. Whitton merely delayed public access to her most private correspondence until 1999, whereas she might easily have submitted only those papers relating to her career and left her private life out of public view. Similarly, Alvey could have chosen not to include the Brodie letters in the collection she submitted to the University of British Columbia Archives. Each of these women, in their retention of very revealing documents and, in the case of Whitton and Alvey, in their making those documents publicly available, made a statement about the importance of their same-sex relationships in terms of their sense of self and in terms of the impression they wished to leave behind.

### **Relationships Between Women in the Postwar Era**

In the postwar era, Canadians were beginning to enjoy greater freedom in geographical movement, urban dwelling, and home ownership. The postwar years are usually counted as boom years, although it must be noted that the relative prosperity of the late 1940s and the 1950s was not experienced equally by all Canadians. Nevertheless, growing urban areas, changing social relationships, and the greater availability of the automobile fundamentally changed Canadians' recreational lives. The impact was particularly significant for young Canadians. Governments, medical professionals and church leaders worried in this era about the dangerous possibilities posed by the car, and by dances and other social functions at which young girls in

particular were not chaperoned by watchful parents or older siblings. Policing the sexuality of youth became paramount.

Because the focus of postwar sexual angst was on heterosexuals and gay men, however, little attention was directed towards lesbian activity. While lesbianism was not completely ignored, the greater public naiveté about it allowed lesbians a little more latitude in courtship and romance than was given to gay men. Further, an association between two girls or two women was unlikely to cause comment unless it seemed too intimate or one or both were masculine in dress or behaviour. Women could be affectionate with one another in public and they could live together without it being remarked upon, whereas society viewed men who lived together very suspiciously, and unmarried women and men living together as morally reprehensible. These factors meant that women were able to court, fall in love, and even live together without necessarily encountering the hostility of the wider society, once they had got over the initial difficulty of finding others like themselves, and provided that they kept their sexual relationships out of public view.

In this section, I examine the sites, processes, and consequences of forming same-sex relationships. The testimonies discussed here reveal many similarities between same-sex and heterosexual courtship and relationships, but there were also important differences. Similarities existed because all Canadians were indoctrinated with the norms of heterosexual courtship and relationship structure. The differences arose because of the additional pressures of homophobia and consequent secrecy, subterfuge, and social marginalization on same-sex couples. Many of the narrators whose testimonies will be examined here attest to the feeling of “naturalness” attendant upon their relationships with women. That naturalness made their relationships with women seem fuller, more emotional, more passionate, and more fulfilling than those with men, but it also meant that their expectations were high and their disappointments consequently profound.

### **Establishing and Maintaining Same-Sex Relationships**

While the film *Forbidden Love* implies that relationships were often formed in bars, where one woman would pick up another, it was more often the case for the narrators in this study that relationships were formed in other contexts. Bar pick-ups certainly happened, but the women interviewed for this study did not frequent the bar scene often enough for it to happen to them, had they been so inclined. Most of the narrators formed their first sexual relationships at school or with schoolfriends, at work, or through other social networks. Many of those sexual relationships discussed in Chapter Three became sexual very quickly. Barb, Mary, Pat, Cheryl, Jill, Veronica, Deborah, Anne, Magda, and Maureen all moved quickly to sexual activity, many of those relationships including genital sexuality within a matter of days or weeks. It is, of course, difficult to compare them with heterosexual relationships in that we do not have a sense of the average amount of time heterosexual teenagers and young adults spent “necking,” then “petting,” and then moving to intercourse. I think it reasonable to suggest, however, that it took most young heterosexual couples before the late 1960s longer to get to genital contact than a matter of days or weeks.

One must consider, however, that the narrators’ reporting of early sexual activity in relationships may be an example of reconstruction of the past. We cannot be absolutely sure that the time-frame involved was as compressed as the narrators portray it. For the very reason that these sexual encounters are crucial elements in the formation of subjectivities, which will be discussed in this chapter, the details involved may have been moulded to support the coming out narrative structure.

That same-sex relationships between women in this period might have become sexual earlier than most heterosexual ones, or were explicitly sexual from the beginning, may be due to several factors. The most obvious of these is that the threat of pregnancy, which doubtless acted as somewhat of a prophylaxis in heterosexual courtship, did not exist in relationships between women. Women could therefore be sexual with one another without fear of that particular

consequence and the social condemnation it always incurred. Also important, however, is the fact that lesbian sexuality was even less discussed in Canadian society than was heterosexual sexuality. While all of the women discussed here knew on some level that same-sex relationships were disapproved of, it might be said that they lacked the specific social training against sexual activity between women that they had received, to varying degrees, about heterosexual activity before marriage. On a deeper, subconscious level, it might even be the case that some women, already aware that their desires placed them outside the boundaries of sexual normalcy, chose to ignore the rules of acceptable sexual engagement altogether. They already were outside the bounds of respectability—why not in this respect also?

Most relationships, even if they began with a pick-up in a bar, lasted a few years at the very least. Just as it was not acceptable in heterosexual society to have a long string of short-term relationships, it was generally not the case that lesbians and bisexual women in this era were “promiscuous” in their sexuality. Even the majority of the bar women had relatively lengthy relationships compared to those of the present day. Already present in the postwar era was a feature of lesbian life that would continue to the present, however: the “get together, move in together” syndrome in which lesbians more rapidly than heterosexuals moved to the living-together stage of a relationship. As will be revealed in the relationship stories below, many of the women in this study who had relationships with other women after they had left home began living with them very early on in their relationships, often within weeks or months.

In an era in which heterosexual courtship tended to be rather long and living together did not occur until after marriage, such behaviour was unusual. It may be accounted for by the fact that same-sex relationships progressed to the sexual stage much earlier than did most heterosexual ones and that these women were therefore already, in their minds, “married.” It could also have been that the majority of the women in this study, regardless of their background, were single working women on low to mid-level incomes who took advantage of the opportunity to pool their financial resources with someone they loved. Because there was

social approval of women living together, they were able to establish homes without fear of heterosexual suspicion.

Same-sex relationships, however marginal they may have been, were heavily influenced by normative rules. Relationships were expected to be long-term if not permanent. Many women thought that they would be with their partners for the rest of their lives. As most women developed their expectations about relationships from their observations of family and friends, from their reading, and from films and other media, lesbian and bisexual women naturally had similar expectations to those of heterosexual women. They wanted to be with a loving companion who was also a friend, in a stable and permanent relationship in which fidelity and honesty were valued and in which resources were pooled. They no more wished to be betrayed by their partners, treated brutally, or lied to than did heterosexual women. The following testimonies reveal that their actual experiences of relationships were as varied as were those of heterosexual women.

There were two pre-eminent sites for meeting future partners, aside from the bars and house parties, and those were the school or university, and the workplace. This was particularly true of first partners. Subsequent partners could be met in community social activities, but very few women made their first foray into the bar scene or the house parties without first having established a relationship with, or at least a strong attraction towards another woman. Barb, Magda, Jill, Maureen, Veronica and Deborah met their first loves at high school. Reva and Anne met partners at night school and university respectively. Mary, Phyl, Lois, Sandra and Cheryl met partners through work.

Mary followed Doris to Canada in 1951. Doris, having completed her nursing training, was able to work in Canada as a nurse, but Mary was not, as she had six months' training yet to complete. She ended up working in nursing assistant jobs where the requirements were less stringent. During that time, she and Doris lived together. Mary recalls that their first six years were happy ones, saying "we thought we were the only two in the world." When they first got

together, they “wanted to be together all the time.” After they came to Canada, they lived with Doris’ mother and step-father for about a year, about as long as many heterosexual couples would have been engaged, and then purchased a house in Richmond Hill. After living there for two years they moved into an apartment in Toronto to be closer to work.

It was after their move to Toronto that Mary and Doris made the trip to Provincetown, discussed in Chapter Three. After having her first taste of the lesbian community, Doris started sleeping with other women, and the relationship began to disintegrate.<sup>570</sup> Around the same time, Mary met Pat, who was to become her new partner. Mary and Doris met Pat at the Continental after ju jitsu class one night. They were friends at first: “It wasn’t a mad, passionate love thing. We were just very, very good friends. We talked a lot, and it grew into a lot.” One night, when Pat was working nights and Esther [Pat’s roommate] was at their place, it became obvious to Mary that Doris and Esther were in love. “By this time,” she said,

I knew it was over between Doris and I anyhow. I just knew it. There wasn’t the same feeling, and I could sort of see her. And I remember her saying something about that they were in love, and I said ‘Well, why don’t you live together, then.’ And Esther says, ‘Well, where would you live?’ ...I said, ‘I’ll go pick up Pat from work.’ And it was me that said to her, ‘Do you love me?’ and she said ‘Of course I love you.’ And I said ‘Enough to live with me?’ I mean, I was going to live with her...that’s how we got together. And it grew deeper and deeper. It wasn’t a fast thing that, it grew after we went to live together.<sup>571</sup>

They began in an apartment and eventually were able to save for a home. While it was not unusual for couples to have formed sexual relationships out of friendships—many same-sex and heterosexual relationships began in exactly this way—it was unusual for two friends to begin a sexual relationship and move in together simultaneously. Pat and Mary have been together since 1957.

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<sup>570</sup> The Provincetown trip is discussed in Chapter Three.

<sup>571</sup> Mary, personal interview, 24 September 1998.

Anne's primary relationship in the period under study grew out of shared political ideals and intellectualism rather than sexual attraction per se. After some years of very brief relationships of between six months and a year with both women and men, Anne eventually formed a long-term relationship with "Ted" and lived with her for over a decade. Both women were university-educated and left-wing. "We were mutually attracted to each other, and mutually got together," said Anne. Ted was older than Anne and initiated the relationship, because Anne did not have enough nerve. Ted had already had a relationship with a woman. Their relationship was a happy one, although they seemed to spend little time together, as each had her own, separate meetings to attend in the evening after work. They rarely entertained. This was the longest relationship Anne was to have. She reports that she used to become bored very easily, which is why her relationships did not usually last very long.<sup>572</sup> She was frequently unfaithful, and on more than one occasion had two relationships going at once.

As in heterosexual relationships, infidelity was an issue in the lesbian community. The narrators were raised in a society which emphasized fidelity in marriage and in pre-marital "dating," and that ideal was applied by the narrators to their same-sex relationships. Several of the narrators reported that they or their partners had had affairs. Lois' first partner, whom she had met while teaching, was "not a faithful lover." "I was. Story of my life, I guess," said Lois. "I could have waited for her 'til kingdom came, but kingdom didn't come and I didn't wait."<sup>573</sup> Several of Lois' partners had affairs during her relationships with them.

Mary & Pat each had an affair during their relationship. In 1961, it was Pat's turn. "I was taking, learning how to do leathercraft in those days," said Pat. "Sure you were, dear," Mary responded humorously. Mary was going to night school. Their friend Beryl started dropping over to teach Pat leathercraft. "All of a sudden I start feeling something," said Mary. "There's

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<sup>572</sup> Anne, personal interview, 1 May 1998.

<sup>573</sup> Lois, personal interview, 3 October 1998.

something going on here.”<sup>574</sup> Mary brought it out in the open and moved out for a few days. “It broke my heart,” she remembered. Their separation did not last very long, however. Mary returned one day to find the door locked. She finally got in the house and “went nuts” at Beryl. Pat very quickly realized her mistake and she and Mary came back together. Mary’s affair occurred after the period under study.

In the 1950s and the early 1960s, lesbian communities, although growing at a rate most alarming to the broader community, were actually rather small, which meant that one had to find a partner in a small group of people. Very complex social relationships between lovers, ex-lovers, and friends could result. Joyce’s story is emblematic of the nature of lesbian community in these early days, in that it illustrates that the smallness and interconnectedness of lesbian communities could sometimes result in women forming multiple relationships within a small social group over a period of time. When Joyce broke up with her partner, she began to see a woman called Maida she had met at the Rideau Public House at Jarvis & Gerrard in Toronto. They lived together for several years, but Joyce eventually began to feel smothered by her partner’s dependence on her:

so she had these friends [Val and Ida] whom I met through her and for some reason I had a fixation on this [Val]...So [Maida] and I parted and I began to live with this [Val] and then I tried to help [Maida]. I felt bad because she was a very nice person. So finally she couldn’t stand living alone...she hadn’t formed another relationship so she phoned us and I said to [Val] ‘we’ve got an extra room in the house’ (we owned a house) and I said ‘let’s take her in, she’s a good friend’ etc., so [Val] said ‘all right.’ So then [Val and Ida] parted, and [Val] and I lived together. [Ida] met someone so then we had [Val] and I living together, [Maida] living with us, [Ida] was with another woman and [Ida] and [Maida] had originally started out by living together...and before [Val] and [Ida]....<sup>575</sup>

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<sup>574</sup> Pat and Mary, joint personal interview, 26 September 1998.

<sup>575</sup> Joyce, LMH interview, 16 November 1985.

It would seem that serial monogamy was common in the period under study. “It seemed in those days nobody left anybody ‘til they had someone else to go to,” commented Joyce.<sup>576</sup> Most of the women in this study who were part of any kind of lesbian community after the war were rarely without a partner. The postwar communities, be they based in bars or in house parties, were sufficiently large that women could find other partners if relationships broke up. For those women not part of the community, however, a break-up could signal a lengthy spell without another relationship.

The community was very supportive. Despite their having been in relationships, and having broken up with each other and formed new relationships, these women remained friends and were supportive of each other in times of need. That level of support included the willingness to allow an ex-lover of a partner to become a roommate. Even though it cannot be said that the lesbian community was always a happy and egalitarian one, it was one in which shared experience of same-sex attraction could potentially blur the differences and antagonisms between people, at least for a time.

### **Femininity and Masculinity in Lesbian and Bisexual Relationships**

The most visible form of lesbian relationship in the period under study was that of the butch/femme couple. As previously mentioned, this was a relationship based on clear demarcation of gender roles, which found expression in both appearance and behaviour. But this form of lesbian relationship did not develop in Canada until the middle of the century, and it was specific to the working-class urban bar culture, although some middle-class lesbians did visit the lifestyle on weekends. The butch/femme culture is amply discussed in Chapter Three and in the works of Elise Chenier and Line Chamberland. For this reason, and also because none of the

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<sup>576</sup> Joyce, LMH interview, 16 November 1985.

narrators interviewed for this study identified strictly as butch or femme, this section will deal primarily with other forms of gender in lesbian relationships.

Masculinity and femininity operated quite differently among middle-class lesbians. Very few middle-class lesbians identified as butch and advertised themselves as such. One must be careful, therefore, in any analysis of female masculinity in lesbian relationships, not to attribute that masculinity necessarily to a butch identity and to assume that a woman's masculinity carried into her relationships in terms of roles, responsibilities, and expectations. There was, especially in the early twentieth century, a style of dress and manner among some middle-class women that was distinctly masculine. In some cases this was allied with lesbianism or bisexuality, but in some it was associated merely with feminist politics or even simply the desire to live a life other than that prescribed by dominant gender norms.<sup>577</sup> The "New Woman" of the turn of the century, single, well-educated, and economically independent, was often assumed because of her transgression of gender norms also to be lesbian.<sup>578</sup>

Martha Vicinus has argued that we can learn much about late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century lesbian mores and also masculine attitudes by examining more carefully than we have previously done the works of the sexologists who, she suggests, "at the very least made available a sexual discourse to middle-class women...."<sup>579</sup> Lesbians, be they middle-class or working-class, have always been defined and had to define themselves in relation to male

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<sup>577</sup> For example, in *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed As Men in the Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness* (London & Scranton, Pennsylvania: Pandora, 1989), Julie Wheelwright discusses a range of women in European history who, for a variety of reasons, dressed temporarily or permanently as men. Although Wheelwright acknowledges the possibility of lesbianism or transgenderism far less than she might, she nevertheless clearly indicates that many women cross-dressed for more material reasons, such as the desire to go to war.

<sup>578</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 265.

<sup>579</sup> Martha Vicinus, "'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong,'" 443.

discourse. That masculinity has been a significant aspect of lesbian life, for some women, and even of non-lesbian gender rebellion, is therefore hardly surprising. In the working-class lesbian communities, masculinity was crucial to butch identity; among middle-class women, masculinity could also be allied to identity, but without butch codes of behaviour.

Just as there existed, both within and outside lesbian communities, different forms of masculinity based on class, so there existed distinctly working-class and middle-class forms of femininity. Very little has been written about the differences between working-class and middle-class femininity as they apply to same-sex relationships, however, because femme history is only just beginning to explore the nuances of feminine lesbians' lives. Undoubtedly, many middle-class lesbians would have disapproved thoroughly of a group of feminine women who were outspoken, sexually open, and public in their lesbianism. That many femmes in Toronto's bar culture were prostitutes, for example, was something that horrified several of the narrators in this study.

Many middle-class women experimented and played with gender. Conti Grey's playing with masculinity was typical of many of the more theatrical and avant garde among the middle class in the 1920s. Conti was also somewhat of an outdoors person, having spent her youth on a small island, and her comfort with practical clothes continued into later life. In Fig 1, for example, Conti (on the right) and her sister Evie can be seen in "cowboy" gear, which they wore while at a Chilcotin ranch one summer. Conti did not identify herself as butch and did not dress in a masculine fashion all the time, however. That her style of dress when she was in France was sufficiently unusual for her to comment in her journal, and that she gives no other examples of being teased about her gender performance indicate that she did not usually dress in a masculine fashion.<sup>580</sup> Family members confirm that she was, in fact, usually very feminine.

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<sup>580</sup> Discussed in Chapter Three.

The same flirtation with gender can be found in the few letters that remain to us from “Bunny” Norcrop to Elisabeth Govan. In an undated letter written most probably in the 1940s, Bunny wrote to Elisabeth, “Come to me often, Betty boy...I’m here, and you can depend on me entirely, bless you.”<sup>581</sup> Bunny called Betty “Betty boy” twice in only a few letters, suggesting that it may well have been a nickname she used frequently. It is unfortunate that Betty’s replies to Bunny have not remained to the present, as it would be interesting to know whether or not Betty also used masculine terminology about herself.

In some cases, gender transgression might be said to be a more fundamental part of a lesbian’s subjectivity. Differences in gender performance were present in the relationship of Frieda and Bud, and in Frieda’s case it might be argued that masculinity was a more serious and permanent aspect of personality. Several examples will serve to illustrate the degree to which Frieda viewed herself as being the masculine partner and Bud the feminine partner. In some ways, this was a relationship between a more “masculine” woman and a “feminine” one.

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<sup>581</sup> UTA, Elisabeth Steel Livingston Govan Papers, B79-0027, Box 3, File 4, letter, Bunny Norcrop to Elisabeth Govan, n.d.



Fig. 1. British Columbia Archives and Records Service, 22 95024, Constance and Evelyn Grey, 1925.

From a relatively young age, Frieda Fraser had sported a very masculine appearance for a woman of her generation (Fig. 2).<sup>582</sup> Frieda cut her hair unusually short during her medical internship, much to the annoyance of her mother and brother (Fig. 3).<sup>583</sup> Nevertheless, her family were forced to tolerate what would be a life-long habit.

Frieda continued to describe herself in masculine terms. In a letter of 10 July 1925, Frieda apologizes for the fact that she had forgotten to wish Bud a happy birthday: “Another thing I seem to have over-looked was to wish you many happy returns of the day, now long since past. That’s the kind of guy I am—but you must have made up your mind to put up with it long before this.”<sup>584</sup> Later that month, she reported to Bud that “My family have induced me to stick back my hair with Kaspar’s Anzora. You have no idea what a vast expanse of noble brow it reveals & my hair is so slick a fly would break its neck on it.”<sup>585</sup> Fig. 4 shows Frieda with such a hair style. Bud replied by asking for a picture of Frieda

with slicked hair. I want to decide whether I like it or not, and on that depends whether I’ll ever come home or not. If I feel that I can’t love you with slicked, I shall stay here, even if I have to resort to the dole. But seriously, dear, will you go to a good man in N.Y. and have a decent photograph of yourself done in your best bib and tucker and looking really beautiful? It would give me more pleasure than anything you could do for me at the moment.”<sup>586</sup>

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<sup>582</sup> Frieda had adopted the outdoor boyish look in her adolescent years.

<sup>583</sup> Interview with Donald Fraser and Nancy Brooks, nephew and niece of Frieda Fraser, 15 December 1997.

<sup>584</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 06, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 10 July 1925.

<sup>585</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 27 July 1925. See Fig. 4.

<sup>586</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 16 August 1925.

Bud liked the picture Frieda sent her, but commented “you do look masculine, darling. The awful Englishwomen who have that pose, have put me off it even more than ever.

Bunny looks like a mental case.”<sup>587</sup> This flirtation with masculine gender may or may not indicate that Frieda regarded herself as masculine. A stronger indication is a visiting card from 1926, on which the printed text reads “Miss Frieda Fraser”. Frieda crossed out “Miss” and put “Mr.”<sup>588</sup>

Frieda suggested to Bud in February 1927 that she take

a job in New York or Montreal or some place after your obligations in England terminate? Have you thought of that? Or is it sound to ignore it entirely if the Lord is to provide? It would be quite tolerable if a guy could see you every three months provided you were near enough to be reached if anything turned up. You know about that.”<sup>589</sup>

Both photographs and letters indicate that Bud was the more feminine of the two in this relationship, and this was acknowledged by both parties. Frieda inquired of Bud in 1927,

What has possessed you to get a lorgnette (you see I even jib at writing it). I can just imagine how snooty you will [drawing of feminine-looking Bud with bun and dress holding lorgnette to her eyes] In defence I shall either [picture of small skinny figure crawling away] or more probably the worm will turn and I shall [picture of masculine woman with slicked-back hair and monocle]. You really are asking for it. We will make a pretty pair.”<sup>590</sup>

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<sup>587</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 June 1926. See Fig. 5.

<sup>588</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 09, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 1926, n.d.

<sup>589</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 11, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 24 February 1927.

<sup>590</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 11, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 11 March 1927. See Fig. 5 for the drawings themselves.



Fig. 2. University of Toronto Archives, B95-0044/003P (14), Frieda Fraser, age 17.

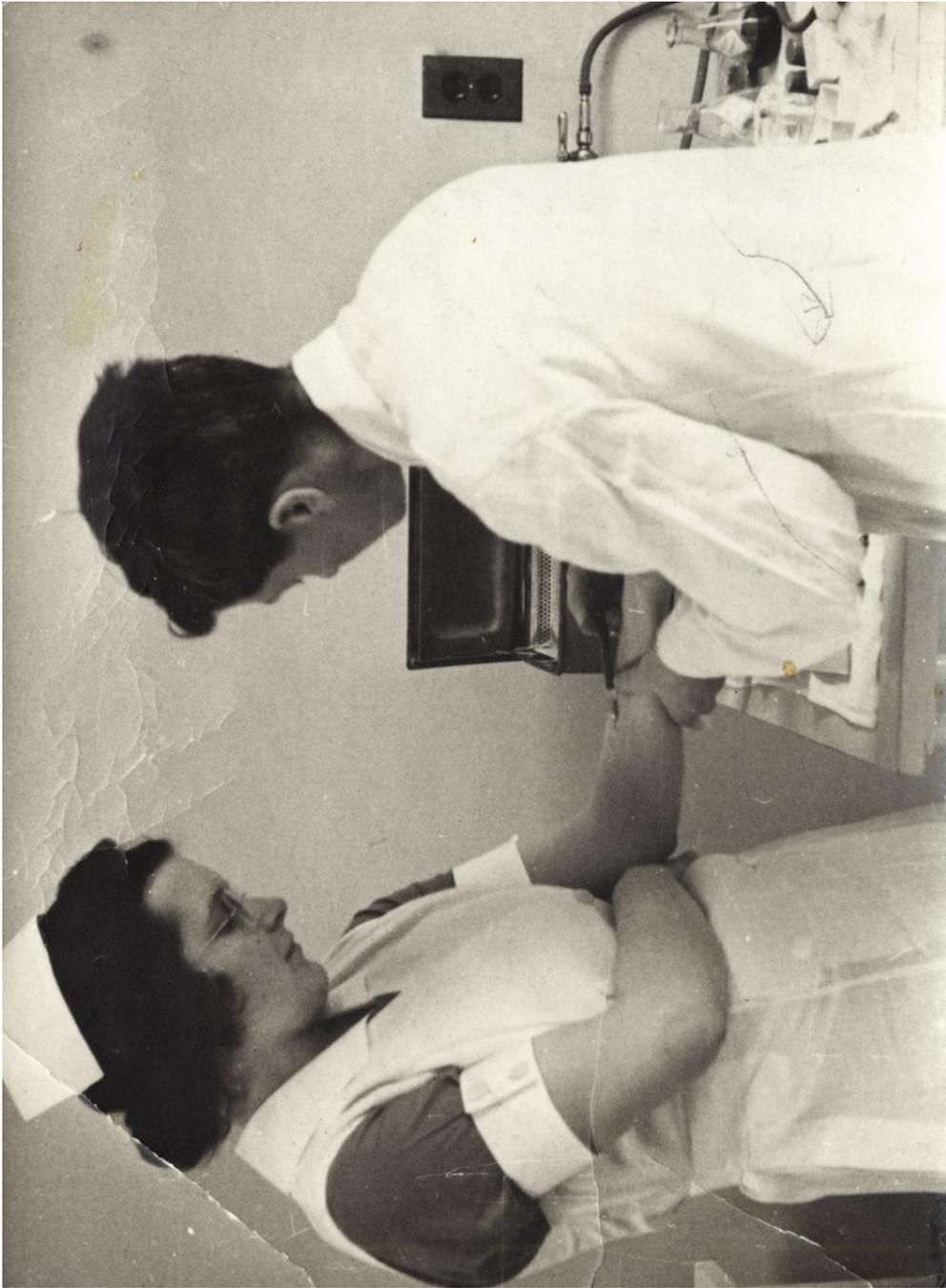


Fig. 3. University of Toronto Archives, B95-0044/003P (07), Frieda Fraser and nurse, n.d.



Fig. 4. University of Toronto Archives, B95-0027/002P (18), Frieda at top left.

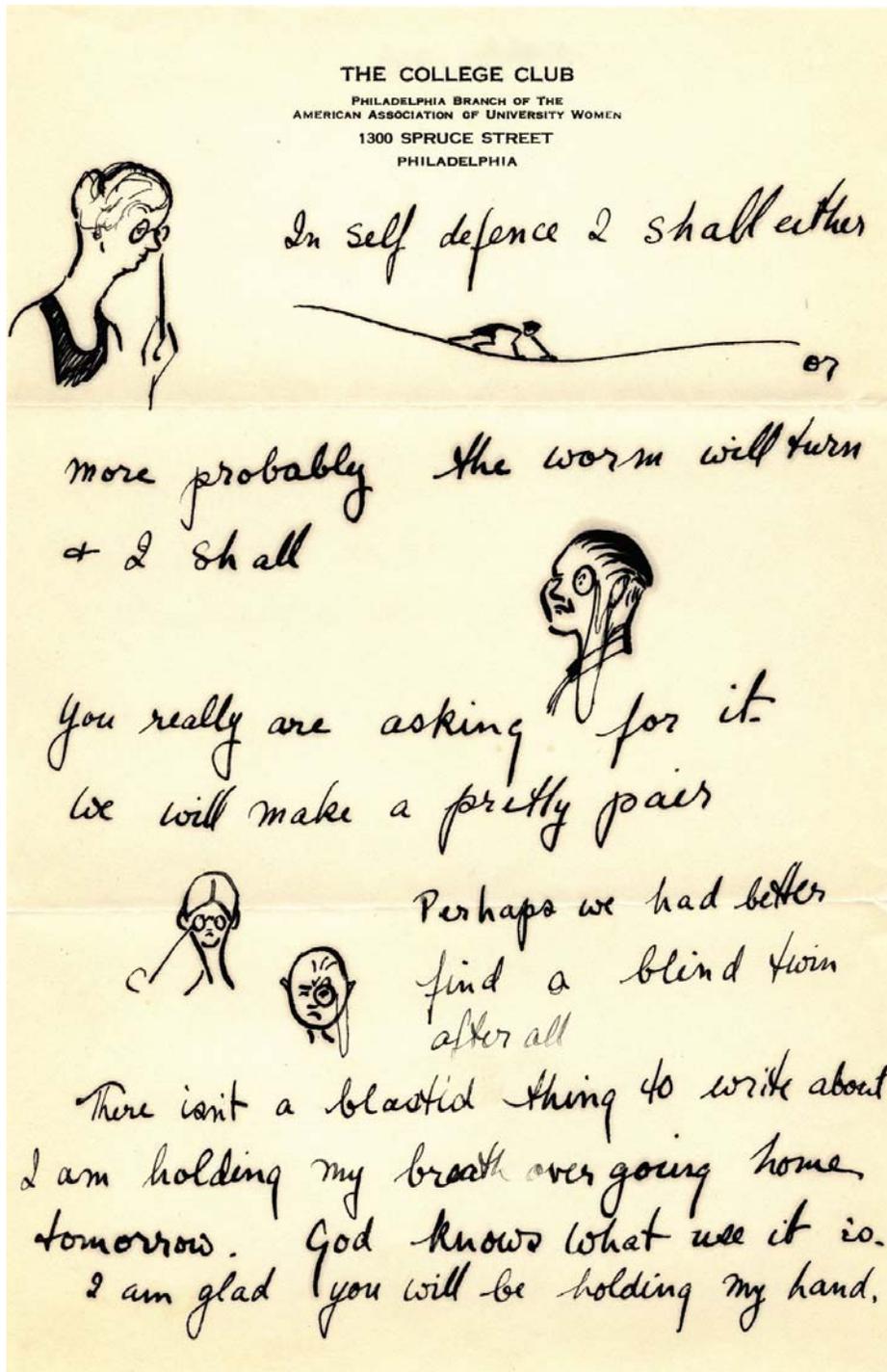


Fig. 5. University of Toronto Archives, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 11, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 11 March 1927. Reproduced with the permission of Dr. Donald Fraser and Mrs. Nancy Fraser Brooks.

In another letter of 1927, she favours a masculine identifier, lamenting that “O my lamb if I go on loving you as vigourously[sic] as this it will be very trying. I hope you can stand a lot of letters; that seems to be one of the things that happens. I must stop. It is devilish late but I’ve been so full of beans lately it is awfully hard to go to bed. And what is the use? You don’t give a guy much rest you know.”<sup>591</sup>

Individually, these examples of gender play need not suggest more than fashionable, 1920s “New Woman” humour; cumulatively, however, their effect is to show that Frieda had a more personal investment in masculinity than someone for whom gender was simply a joke. Both the consistency and the insistence of the masculine identifiers Frieda uses are, I suggest, indicative of a rejection of traditional femininity on her part, if not an adoption of a masculine subjectivity.

In the absence of clear statements about gendered identities, or evidence of community based on gender roles, it is impossible to state with any certainty what might have been the meaning of gender in relationships between middle-class women. It is clear from these examples that the masculine gender was employed by one partner in a way that suggests an awareness of divergence from femininity. Whether or not such divergence was to the point of identity, either a middle-class version of butch or a transgender identity, is impossible to assess. It is certain that, even if Frieda Fraser did feel essentially masculine, that form of masculinity was markedly different from the working-class version of it which would come to predominate in the butch/femme culture after the Second World War.

An analysis of interview material reveals that the butch-femme relationship, although important in the postwar era, was hardly hegemonic. As other historians have indicated, class differences often determined the degree to which butch and femme were employed as identities. Those women who lived fully in the bar scene also lived fully in butch and femme roles, as it

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<sup>591</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 11, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 6 February 1927.

was along these lines that the community was structured until the late 1960s. Those women who were not always in the bar scene, however, or who visited it only occasionally, had a less profound investment in the butch-femme social structure.<sup>592</sup>

Lois, who was involved in the bar scene quite often but who was also a teacher, dressed like a butch “in cowboy boots and shirt and black pants and everything” at the bars, but she argues that she thought that butch and femme roles “were a joke.”<sup>593</sup> She accounts for her involvement in the bars by suggesting that she lived the bar life on the weekends because living as a lesbian meant that one was already living a double life, and that therefore she lived the double life fully, having one life during the week and another on the weekend. It may well be that Lois’ perspective on the bar culture has been affected by her involvement in 1970s lesbian feminism, which condemned the butch and femme women for their adoption of masculinity and femininity. While she may have lived a middle-class lifestyle during the week as a teacher, she was sufficiently involved in the bar scene to have participated in several fights with butches. She also dressed in a very butch manner and wore a knife. That she thought of the roles as a joke at the time is therefore unlikely. It is much more likely that her interpretation of the roles has been altered in the intervening years by political condemnation of butch masculinity and aggressiveness.

Pam commented, “I guess I was femme, I suppose. Mickie was the more aggressive or whatever. It really wasn’t all that, to us, but to some of our friends it was very important.”<sup>594</sup> It was not until the 1970s, after Pam had broken off her relationship with Mickie and formed a new one, that she switched roles. “I wasn’t terribly thrilled with that. I didn’t find being butch very great. I mean, in those days, I mean, you paid. Not like maybe today. If you took somebody out

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<sup>592</sup> Their antipathy to the butch/femme lifestyle is discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>593</sup> Lois, personal interview, 3 October 1998.

<sup>594</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998.

for dinner, you bloody well paid for it.”<sup>595</sup> Pam seemed to form her gender role in relation to that of her partner, and so she was able to switch. Her testimony does not suggest a deeply-held subjectivity based on a single gender role, but rather a more mutable gender performance formed relationally and dependent on that of a partner.

Many of the lower middle-class and upper working-class women whose social lives I describe in Chapter Five were ambivalent about butch and femme roles. They were much more likely to describe themselves as “butchy” or “butchier” and “feminine” than they were to use the identity labels “butch” and “femme.” Stating that one was butchy rather than butch, or feminine rather than femme, not only placed one’s gender performance closer to what was regarded as acceptable but also separated one’s subjectivity on the basis of class. To identify as a butch was to be associated with women who wore men’s clothes and whose behaviour and appearance was working-class. Similarly, femme women’s femininity was working-class femininity, and therefore not the kind the narrators wished to manifest themselves.

The narrators were only occasionally involved in the bar scene, concerned as they were about respectability and the threat to their employment, and having as they did an alternative social world of house parties.<sup>596</sup> Their investment in the structural norms of the bar culture was therefore limited. They did employ gender differentiation in their relationships, but the “butchier” women especially were less likely to invest heavily in the stereotypical butch appearance and behaviour, as it was a very public and therefore dangerous testament of queerness. Many of the narrators, such as Lois, Barb, and Pat, favoured a tailored and moderately masculine look, especially when visiting the bars or going to house parties, but definitely did not wear men’s clothes, as did many of the bar butches.

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<sup>595</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998.

<sup>596</sup> This topic is discussed in depth in Chapter Five.

One must remember that all the narrators were raised with gender differentiation as a central characteristic of all relationships. That there should be gender differentiation in some same-sex ones is therefore not surprising. Phyl remembers her long-term relationship, formed initially at work and the only one she had with a woman before 1965, as a very egalitarian one. She and her partner had different tasks in the relationship, but they were not based on gendered roles of butch and femme, although Phyl acknowledges that she was the more feminine in terms of tasks around the house than was her partner.<sup>597</sup> Her partner did more of the household maintenance such as electrical work. Given that all women in this era were raised with norms emphasizing gender divisions in the home, it is understandable that lesbian couples also often divided household chores on very gendered lines. Barb and Chris, both of whom grew up on farms and were used to physical labour, were comfortable with more masculine tasks and thus tended to do more of them than their partners. Most of the narrators, however, remembered their relationships differently, and recalled sharing tasks in a non-gendered way. For the most part, the household tasks they did were traditionally more “feminine” ones, with the exception of yard maintenance. The more traditionally “masculine” tasks, such as plumbing, carpentry, and electrical work, were usually done by tradespeople. Because the narrators did not identify as butch or femme, they did not have the kind of investment in gender roles which might have caused them to be more rigid in their adoption of household tasks.

### **Alcoholism and Abuse in Same-Sex Relationships Before 1965**

In the postwar era, when ideal gender roles were becoming once again more rigid, while more people seemed not to be acting in accordance with them,<sup>598</sup> gender became an increasingly

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<sup>597</sup> Phyl, personal interview, 28 September 1998.

<sup>598</sup> Crises about gender resulting from the dramatic shifts of the Second World War resulted in an increased emphasis on the return to an ideal of heterosexual matrimony, in which the woman remained at home with children and the man was employed in a well-paid job with a sufficient

crucial aspect of lesbian life, most particularly of working-class lesbian life. Kennedy and Davis have shown that, in the Buffalo community of the 1950s, gender roles became more rigidly defined. Violence and jealousy within the butch-femme community increased, and much of it was butch violence directed at femmes.<sup>599</sup> They account for this change not simply in terms of the butch interest in manifesting a masculine persona, but rather in terms of the new interest in “the tough masculine culture—the violence, jealousy, and solidarity—of the 1950s bar crowd....”<sup>600</sup> As the American bar scene became more entrenched in the 1950s and 1960s, and the pressures on lesbians grew as more public attention was focused on them, physical and emotional abuse, alcoholism and drug addiction became more prevalent.<sup>601</sup>

It has often been assumed in lesbian communities that relationships between women will necessarily be more egalitarian and less abusive than heterosexual relationships. Many women entering relationships with other women for the first time believe that they will automatically be better and closer relationships, and yet the evidence suggests that abuse, both emotional and physical, is present in lesbian communities as it is elsewhere. Lesbian abuse has only recently

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income that his wife would not have to work. Many women continued to work, however, especially before marriage and then again when children were older. It was also argued by some “experts” in Canadian society that the new postwar suburbs resulted in the masculinization of women and in absentee fatherhood, both considerable threats to the family. See, for example, Veronica Strong-Boag, “Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945-1960,” *Canadian Historical Review* 72, 4 (December 1991), 471-504; Veronica Strong-Boag, “‘Their Side of the Story’: Women’s Voices from Ontario Suburbs, 1945-1960,” in *A Diversity of Women: Ontario 1945-1980*, ed. Joy Parr (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 46-74; and Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

<sup>599</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 316-317.

<sup>600</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 320.

<sup>601</sup> Elise Chenier has dealt with the topic of drug use and drug pushing, and the links between the drug scene and prostitution, in her thesis “Tough Ladies and Troublemakers,” and so I shall not deal with that subject here.

begun to be discussed openly, however, perhaps because lesbians in the past did not want to provide homophobic society with ammunition to level at the community, perhaps because abuse, which is difficult enough to talk about in heterosexual couples, is thought even more traumatic when perpetrated by another woman. But abuse does and did exist in lesbian relationships, and its impact was felt by many women in this study.

Kennedy and Davis suggest that the late 1950s and early 1960s “placed the butch in the vulnerable and stressful position of defender of the community and promoted the fem as the highly desired, but unreliable, refuge or source of security.”<sup>602</sup> Living full-time as a butch woman in a decade increasingly hostile to gender non-conformity meant that the butch was increasingly isolated, unemployed, and harassed by police and men in general. In Buffalo, butches increasingly had to live off femmes, they drank more, and they became more insecure emotionally, resulting in the desire to protect the one thing that was important—their relationships. Unfortunately, that sometimes translated into extreme jealousy and even violence.<sup>603</sup>

Whether or not the same transition occurred for the Canadian bar cultures is difficult to determine, as little data exists for the 1940s with which to compare later decades. Certainly, in the 1950s, violence was a part of the public lesbian community. The fights in bars and at parties discussed in Chapter Five were only part of the picture, however. Abuse within relationships also occurred frequently. Jan and Lois remembered one “Big Dubie” who “dressed like a man, eh? She used to beat up her little hooker girlfriend, too,” said Lois, “I think she almost killed her.”<sup>604</sup>

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<sup>602</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 320. “Fem” and “femme” refer to the same identity category and are used variously by scholars and the women whose identities they describe.

<sup>603</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 321.

<sup>604</sup> Group interview, LMH interviews, 19 October 1985. Elise Chenier documents the abuse involved in the bar scene in her thesis “Tough Ladies and Troublemakers.”

Abuse was also part of the lives of many women who seldom or never went to the bars. After Cheryl and her partner had moved from Newfoundland to Ontario, Cheryl began to suffer the effects of abuse. “We moved three or four times,” said Cheryl, “and that was getting into the latter part of our relationship, and she became very, very suspicious of who I went to see.” If Cheryl arrived home late from work, Robyn would suspect that she was seeing someone. Then Robyn began going out at night

and then coming home usually with a girl. I had no idea where she went to pick them up. And she didn't bring a lot of them home but she brought several home, and they were all very much like, she was kind of heavy into the bottle at the time, and they were too...I'd be sound asleep and all of a sudden I'd get a fist right in the pit of my stomach...and there were times that she'd accuse me of being with, you know, somebody that I worked with, somebody who was my age who was single...So, it just got from bad to worse...and there were times that she was really hung over or something like that, there were a couple of times that she took a knife to my throat and threatened that she was going to ram it right through my throat if I didn't tell her the truth.<sup>605</sup>

It was not the physical threats that most frightened Cheryl, however: “those were not the things that scared me,” she said. Significantly more powerful was the threat of exposure: “You know what scared me? She threatened to tell my parents what we were doing. And I thought, ‘oh my God, this will kill my Dad. If he knows that I'm with Robyn in *that way*.’ I mean, I couldn't, I couldn't have that happen. So under the threat of that, that was the thing that kept me with her as long as I did.”<sup>606</sup>

It is clear from this passage that Cheryl, although not at this stage aware of language explicitly describing lesbians, was aware, on a conscious level, of the nature of her sexuality, and that it was a sexuality disapproved of in broader society. Her use of the words “in *that way*” denotes a clarity with which she understood the nature of her relationship with Robyn. Even

<sup>605</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

<sup>606</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

without a word to describe it—lesbian or gay—she knew that her love for someone of her own sex set her apart from what most Canadians in this period considered normal and moral. While she may not have had an identity in the modern sense, she most definitely had a subjectivity based on her sexuality and an awareness of its consequences.

The last straw for Cheryl occurred one night when she finally fought back against the violence. Robyn came home with a woman and both of them started beating Cheryl up while she was asleep. Cheryl nearly vomited. “So I got up and caught my wind,” she said. “I looked at the two of them, and both had been drinking, and I just took one by the side of the head and the other by the side of the head...and I knocked their heads together. And they just fell to the floor.”<sup>607</sup> Cheryl told Robyn that she had had enough, she fell to the floor, and she told Robyn she did not want to be hit any more. “And all of a sudden the door kicked open, and Mrs. D.—she was our landlady—she was there with her cane, and she pointed the cane, she shook the cane, and she said to the two of them ‘you get out of my house right now this minute, and don’t you ever come back.’” It turned out that Mrs. D. had been aware of the abuse for some time. She gave Cheryl a glass of beer and said, “Now, it’s about time you took this into your own hands...it’s about time you did something.”<sup>608</sup> Cheryl did—she ended the relationship with Robyn and joined the military the next morning. She still had interactions with Robyn, however, as their families knew each other and she did not want their breakup to be heard about in Newfoundland because of family connections. Robyn was to re-surface some time later, when Cheryl was stationed in Nova Scotia. She attempted to persuade Cheryl to return to the relationship and, when Cheryl grew tired of the harassment, she had several of her very butch servicewomen friends advise Robyn politely that she should leave her alone.

Lois’ second major relationship was with a woman she had met at the Continental,

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<sup>607</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

<sup>608</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

a lovely woman when she wasn't drinking. Unfortunately, she was an alcoholic. So we lived together for several years, but she tried to kill me a couple of times with hot fat and stuff because she was so drunk she didn't know what she was doing. And I learned you can't live with an alcoholic. But I loved her, tried again, you know. She went to live with her daughter for a while, and I went to meet her at the train when she came back. She looked ok, but all of a sudden I realized that she was drunk—she'd been drinking on the train—so we had to split up because I couldn't take her any more. I couldn't take being attacked.<sup>609</sup>

Lois, like many women in same-sex relationships and also many in heterosexual relationships, was disinclined to sever a relationship based on a single or even several instances of abuse.

Women in the period under study were still expected to endure physical abuse and the alcoholic behaviour of spouses. Just as in heterosexual relationships a beating was generally viewed as insufficient cause for separation, so too in the lesbian community was there silence about and toleration of abuse. Not only did lesbian women sometimes have to face the disappointment of being abused by another woman,<sup>610</sup> something they did not expect, but also there were no safe houses or institutions to which they could go for safety, save those of friends. A lesbian who went to the police and complained about the abuse she was suffering at the hands of a female partner would hardly have had a sympathetic hearing.

The presence of abuse in a relationship bore no relation to the social class of the individuals concerned. While many of the women who rarely went to the bars regarded physical violence as an unfortunate aspect of bar life, they themselves were not immune to its effects. Pam's first long-term partner, Mickie, was a manager of a utility company, very rare in the 1950s. She was a violent alcoholic. Alcohol, according to Pam, was a serious problem in the lesbian community of the 1950s and 1960s. Pam also acknowledges that drugs were around in that period too, although she "was too dumb to know the difference."<sup>611</sup> As in the case of

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<sup>609</sup> Lois, personal interview, 3 October 1998.

<sup>610</sup> See Chapter Five for testimonies about the shock this caused.

<sup>611</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998.

heterosexual relationships, the presence of alcohol was linked to a higher frequency of domestic violence. Several of the women reported that their partners treated them more violently when they had been drinking. Chenier reveals the prevalence of alcohol and drugs in the bar community, but it was not the case that drinking was limited to the poor working class. As I discuss in Chapter Five, there was also much drinking at the house parties run by lower middle-class lesbians in the suburbs. That alcohol abuse did sometimes exacerbate physical abuse within relationships.

While the twists and turns of some lesbian relationships might, on the surface, seem somewhat dysfunctional, one must remember that relationships were entered into in a small community whose members lived with secrecy, deceit and marginalization. They had been raised to believe in heterosexual norms which conflicted with their own desires. By the time lesbian women reached the lesbian community, they were aware that their relationships were regarded as unhealthy and unnatural, and that as individuals they were viewed as sick. The resultant internal conflicts and negative self-images, and the living of double lives, took their toll on many lesbians. Many resorted to alcohol and drugs, and some were violent.

Abuse could potentially affect subjectivity. Both Cheryl and Pam found it difficult to understand how one woman could abuse another. In Cheryl's case, the abuse received at the hands of her first partner caused her to swear off women. Cheryl joined the air force and decided that she was not going to pursue relationships with women again. She began dating men, and it was two years before she was able to decide that she was fighting her attraction towards women. In the end, her sexual orientation won, but the abuse did permanently change her perspective on same-sex relationships. It may be that other women were not as able to recover from abuse from a female partner, however, and they may have left the lesbian community for heterosexual lives. It is also difficult to determine whether or not awareness of social isolation and the smallness of lesbian communities kept these women in abusive relationships longer than they would have

stayed in abusive heterosexual ones. Both lesbian women and heterosexual women had reasons for staying with abusive partners.

One must remember that the 1950s and 1960s were hardly times of fully healthy heterosexual relationships. There remained, in the middle of the twentieth century, considerable domestic violence and alcoholism. Domestic violence would not be addressed in any serious and widespread way until after the period under study. Whereas there existed growing disapproval of spousal abuse in heterosexual society, it was still disapproval based on *extent* rather than *existence*, by which I mean that some levels of spousal abuse were tolerated. It was only the more extreme forms which incurred legal penalties. Moreover, women were often assumed to have provoked or otherwise deserved the treatment meted out to them by their husbands.<sup>612</sup> Many narrators for this study had witnessed domestic violence and alcoholism in their families. Within such a context of tolerance of spousal abuse and placing of blame for it on the victim, it is hardly surprising that many women remained in abusive relationships.

### **The Consequences of Being Lesbian or Bisexual: Relationships With Family.**

Throughout the twentieth century, women who were attracted to other women had to balance their desires, and the wish to explore those desires physically, with the need to maintain happy relationships with their families of origin. The evidence from this study suggests tentatively that complete separation from family because of lesbianism was unusual in the period 1910 to 1965. It would be tempting to view more recent and “liberal” attitudes towards

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<sup>612</sup> For further information on domestic violence, see Annalee Golz, “‘If a Man’s Wife Does Not Obey Him, What Can He Do?’: Marital Breakdown and Wife Abuse in Late Nineteenth-Century and Early Twentieth-Century Ontario,” in *Law, Society and the State: Essays in Modern Legal History*, eds. Louis A. Knafla and Susan W.S. Binnie (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 323-350 and Cynthia R. Comacchio, *The Infinite Bonds of Family: Domesticity in Canada, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

lesbianism as contributing to higher quality and longer maintained family ties, and the attitudes of the past as deleterious to family relationships. In some cases, this was true, but many lesbians growing up and forming relationships between 1910 and 1965 remained close to their families, with sexuality forming a site of conflict but not of irrevocable division.

During the postwar era, psychological discourse became increasingly influential, and under its terms same-sex desires and behaviours were abnormal, unhealthy, and requiring of treatment. The Canadian public was exposed more frequently to psychological terms in the 1950s and 1960s, at precisely that same moment in Canadian history when the emerging gay and lesbian urban communities were being exposed to the public through articles in the tabloid press and in more “respectable” media. These two decades would witness the beginning of a change in relationships between lesbians and their families. Families now reacted to lesbian daughters in the terms of the discourse and began to see them as needing treatment for a medical problem rather than as simply engaged in behaviours which were “unnatural” or “immoral.”

I further suggest that, in many cases, lesbians in the period under study had stronger ties to their families of origin than would those who came out in the 1970s into the lesbian movement because lesbians lacked alternative family frameworks.<sup>613</sup> Further documentary evidence would have to be obtained to show conclusively that women were not as often thrown out of the family home before 1965, and particularly before 1950, because of lesbian relationships, but the evidence obtained for this study does suggest, at least, that family relationships were maintained

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<sup>613</sup> It is not only the case that women in the decades after 1970 could leave homophobic families behind and live in lesbian communities. A disturbing trend in recent decades has been for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender teens to be thrown out of the family home and left to live on the streets. A high proportion of street kids are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. In 1994, Pierre Tremblay authored *The Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Factor in the Youth Suicide Problem*, a report he submitted to the Minister of Education for Alberta. He reported that an estimated 20% to 40% of homeless children and teens are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. While most data on the subject refers to American cities, it is argued that the percentages are similar for Canada. The report is now out of print but data can be found at <http://www.virtualcity.com/youthsuicide/book.htm>.

rather than severed. Homophobia existed, but other factors reduced the likelihood of family abandonment.

Lesbians, before the advent of the communes, the feminist movement, and the gay and lesbian rights movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, negotiated the boundaries of their sexuality in a situation that did not include the notions of “alternative” family structure and lesbian “community” that would later emerge with political activism and greater social tolerance of same-sex partnerships. What little community did exist was based on social connection rather than political agenda. And while many longer-term lesbian relationships were phrased in terms similar to those of heterosexual marriage, there was little theorizing of these relationships as representing alternative families. These ideas would come later in the century.

Before 1965, and especially before the 1950s, lesbians remained perhaps a little closer to their families of origin, even after becoming sexually active as lesbians, than did many later lesbians. The context of their lives was, in many ways, fundamentally different: not only were the ideological constructs of the lesbian community and the alternative family not yet in place, but earlier lesbians also had less financial independence on the basis of which they could break their familial ties. There was much greater emphasis on familial duty than would exist in later decades. Furthermore, while societal approval of close relationships between women began to wane as early as the turn of the century and was all but gone by the 1930s, Canadian society did not, until at least the mid-1950s, have a widely available discourse of pathological homosexuality on which to base its reactions to women who transgressed heteronormativity. With the arrival of such a discourse, family reactions towards lesbians began to change.

Yet it cannot be said that the 1950s and 1960s saw a sudden swing towards family intolerance of lesbians; nor did lesbians suddenly sever family ties once they had become aware of their sexual orientation. In only some families were lesbians suddenly the target of rejection and isolation. Even within a context of increasing societal discussion of and hostility towards lesbians, many families remained very tolerant of their wayward daughters, because other factors

militated against the tendency for lesbian sexuality to involve family condemnation. The mid-twentieth century was, however, a time at which there occurred a significant break between lesbian life and family life. The formation of urban lesbian communities, the structures of which would eventually replace many of the functions of the family and from which would arise the alternative family structures of 1970s and 1980s lesbianism, and the new hegemony of psychological discourse were the key events in the changing relationship between lesbian subjectivities and the family.

Before Freudian ideas became popular, lesbian relationships were disapproved of by the general public, but largely without the psychiatric and psychological discourses which were to become hegemonic within Canadian society after 1950. Family condemnation rested, therefore, on somewhat vague and unspecified grounds. An analysis of family relationships from the 1920s and the 1930s reveals a discomfort with lesbianism, but one very seldom expressed in the sort of terminology that would become popular during the Second World War. In 1926, for example, Helene Fraser remarked to her daughter, Frieda, "It is pleasant for you to have Bud. I am glad the interns like her & I shall also be glad if she will like them & not concentrate all her affections on poor little you."<sup>614</sup> She was commenting on a visit Frieda's partner was making to her while Frieda was working in New York as a doctor. Mrs. Fraser's reactions to Bud, Frieda's partner, were not always as "beneficent" as they were on this occasion. Frieda conveyed her mother's words while writing to Bud in England, where she had been sent in order to get her away from Frieda. Their relationship continued through letters, sometimes several in a single day, as they successfully thwarted their families' attempts to keep them apart.

Frieda and Bud, whose relationship lasted from when they were nineteen to when Bud died in 1979 at the age of eighty, had constantly to negotiate the waters of family disapproval. In January of 1926, Frieda had attempted to elicit from Bud's mother and sister some information

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<sup>614</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 8, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 5 March 1926.

regarding their perspective on Bud's temporary return to Canada. The resulting argument involved Frieda and Bud in lengthy discussions. On 11 January, Bud wrote to Frieda that she had had letters from her mother and sister and commented "you have got me into a nice mess with them."<sup>615</sup> She admonished Frieda for thinking that she could have found out more information, and urged her to be more careful in the future.

It was Frieda's mother who proved the more hostile to their relationship, however, and around whom Frieda and Bud most often had to plan their meetings. Frieda's father had died in 1916, and Frieda seemed to feel a great responsibility towards her mother, ambivalent though the relationship was. Frieda's letters illustrate the delicate nature of the maternal relationship. After a trip home for Christmas, Frieda wrote "By the way, when I was at home I took careful soundings as to your status in the home. Mother doesn't seem to mind your being talked of now—she did a bit when she was here—rather likes it up to a point...."<sup>616</sup> By the middle of 1926, however, when Frieda and Bud were planning their next meeting, the situation was tense once again. Frieda wrote to Bud "Either you arrive just before Mother & we greet her arm in arm, or Mother arrives just before you & will want me out of arm's way. I rather hope for the former. It would be a nightmare if it weren't so funny."<sup>617</sup>

Both families posed problems. Bud commented, "my family think that you led me into it, just as yours blame me...."<sup>618</sup> She wrote to Frieda, "It seems such an appalling waste of time to

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<sup>615</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 4, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 11 January 1925. Although the letter is dated 1925, all the contextual information suggests that it was actually written in 1926 and that she had made an error in the dating.

<sup>616</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 7, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 1 January 1926.

<sup>617</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 9, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 13 June 1926.

<sup>618</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 04, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 28 May 1926.

have to go and see my family first and for most of the time. It isn't as if they wanted to see me particularly. They would bear up if I wanted to stay in any other place but N.Y. to see anyone else but you."<sup>619</sup> And the next day, she lamented "What rotten luck that Mrs. Fraser is coming back in July! You must tell me when, so that we can see what can be arranged. It is an awful thought, but I feel that N.Y. is not big enough for both of us...."<sup>620</sup> Bud rearranged her schedule so as to be able to visit Frieda when Mrs. Fraser was not there. In July, 1926, Bud asked

I suppose you wouldn't think of coming here to see me instead of Montreal? It is further I know, but the Williams family would treat you agreeably and give you a bed for the night you'd be here...I know it's a mad idea but I have the horrid feeling that we should see each other before Mrs. Fraser comes, or something will happen. I really know that it won't but I would like to see you now. Also, it would be quite possible not to mention the fact that you had been, if it would make you unpopular afterwards.<sup>621</sup>

It seems that each woman visited her family individually during the summer of 1926. Bud attempted to resolve things with her family, but was unsuccessful. She told Frieda that

The whole thing came up quite soon after I got back when I said I was going to see you, and they said that they hoped I had got over that absurd business and that as you weren't here to pursue me—isn't it odd that both our families think that the other does the pursuing?—there was no point in my running down to N.Y. to put myself in your way. So I said that I was fond of you and it wasn't entirely on your side...She [Bud's mother] said that it was such an unusual relationship, to which I agreed, that she had nothing against you personally, in fact rather liked you, and that she could never approve but I would no longer be badgered about it.<sup>622</sup>

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<sup>619</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 4, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 11 June 1926.

<sup>620</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 4, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 12 June 1926.

<sup>621</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 5, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 10 July 1926.

<sup>622</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 5, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 17 July 1926.

They were to see each other late in the summer. In early August, Frieda prepared Bud for the worst, commenting that

The only thing dear, that is likely to occur is the one that you didn't mention—perhaps you knew it—& that is that I will get annoyed & be unpleasant to Mother. Then she will point out that that is the evil effect etc. If I could see enough of you beforehand it mightn't happen.<sup>623</sup>

A few days later, she suggested “Another thing, dear, if you care to try it I think we could both rub along on my pay. It seems to be the thing that both our families are pushing us into against our will & theirs.” She further remarked that

‘Living in Sin’ has always struck me as a very boring affair because no one else will play with you. And our combining forces would have much the same disadvantages without any adequate reason for it. It is all so silly & unpleasant because people insist on making such a fuss about it. All we ask of them is to let us see each other rather often like Christians & they shove us into this muck! I'm fed up with being careful about them. What I don't understand is how they don't mind what we do as long as they can pretend they don't know.<sup>624</sup>

The above passages reveal not only Frieda's frustration with the situation but also the solidity of her subjectivity. That she regarded their relationship as a marriage can be seen in her opinion that were they to live together they would be treated as if they were “living in sin” and would be socially isolated, but that that treatment would be without reason. And in no way did family or other criticism of their relationship make Frieda waver in her devotion. It may, in fact, have increased it by requiring of Frieda and Bud considerable planning of meetings and discussion of the opposition, bringing them even closer together and helping them to build barriers to repel homophobic opinion.

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<sup>623</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 9, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 2 August 1926.

<sup>624</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 09, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 6 August 1926.

Each woman was also annoyed by her family's tendency to blame the other partner in the relationship. The letters reveal that each family was inclined to see its own daughter/sister as an "innocent" woman negatively influenced by the other. Both Frieda and Bud resented the implication that they were in some way under the evil spell of the other. Such an implication was not only insulting to their partner; it also portrayed them as passive and weak. That they rejected the inference should be taken both as a sign of their loyalty to each other and as an expression of a self-aware subjectivity.

By the end of 1926, matters had become difficult. Frieda wrote,

Your being away hasn't been of the slightest good to Mother apparently. We exchanged a few words several days ago. The essence of it was in the end that 'something or some one has come between us' & that she thinks is you. Whereupon I pointed out that the condition existed long before I knew you. Which surprised her & made her quite miserable I'm afraid.<sup>625</sup>

Frieda's mother was concerned about the relationship from its inception, but became especially concerned at the prospect of Bud returning to Canada on a permanent basis in 1927. She wrote to her friend Nettie for advice. Nettie, in her guidance to Helene on how to deal with the relationship between Frieda and Bud, clearly reveals the availability in the 1920s of at least some works attesting to the existence of "abnormal" sexualities.<sup>626</sup> The degree to which Helene herself was familiar with such ideas is unknown, but it may be said that she held the relationship to be unhealthy and unnatural, even if she did not use any of the new sexological terminology with which to describe it.

Nettie identified Helene's concern about the relationship as based not on personal dislike, but rather on "a well-founded apprehension, as you believe, that this friendship so-called, is eternally injuring Frieda's life—her development, her career, her health & her future happiness!"

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<sup>625</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 036, File 10, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 22 December 1926.

<sup>626</sup> The first portion of Nettie's reply is discussed in Chapter One.

Given Helen's prior lack of success in parting the two, however, Nettie suggested a more "psychological" approach. Nettie suggested that Helene indicate to Frieda that

you have made up your mind to withdraw from any further effort in this line—to let Frieda "go to it" just as hard and far and fast as she likes. That you have still one quiet confidence lying in the bottom of your heart—and that is, that Frieda will never let Bud, or anyone else, crowd you out of that chamber of her affections and her fealty which has always been yours—her own and only mother's. That your only stipulation in making all this over to her is that she will never try to bring you and Bud together, in future: that that would be worse than you could carry! But that you give Frieda up to her in every way—she can go just as far as she likes, you give her *carte blanche*—with this one stipulation that she does not attempt to bring her to you or to your home.<sup>627</sup>

Nettie then outlined a series of specific strategies Helene could employ in order to ensure that her message was heard. In the end, both families' attempts to keep Frieda and Bud apart failed.

After Bud's return from England, the two continued their relationship, eventually buying a house and living together until Bud's death.

Despite the obvious tensions involved in the relationships of Bud and Frieda with their respective families, the daughters maintained regular contact with family members and seemed to feel a duty to familial ties. Both during their separation and when they were able to live once again in Canada, their social worlds consisted primarily of women, some of whom were in same-sex relationships, yet these female social groups did not draw them away from their families.

Frieda's mother and Bud's various family members, for their own part, were possessed of a perspective antagonistic to relationships between women. On several occasions, when the subject came under discussion, they made it clear that they felt such relationships to be unnatural. That they phrased their criticism in such terms indicates the influence of the new, sexological discourse regarding relationships between women, which regarded them as abnormal and unhealthy. Gone was the tolerance which might have existed in middle-class circles a

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<sup>627</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 001, File 17, Nettie Bryant to Helene Fraser, 23 April 1927.

century earlier. Despite their use of a language of abnormality and unnaturalness, however, family members seemed able to differentiate the relationship between Frieda and Bud from those more soundly condemned in public discourse. Helene and her friend Nettie were able to hold negative opinions about the relationship while simultaneously believing that Frieda and Bud were not “repulsive” and “abnormal.”

Anne’s relationship with her mother, although problematic, was without significant conflict on the subject of sexuality. Anne is sure that her mother knew of her sexuality early on, even though Anne was engaged for a time in sexual relationships with men. Anne believes that the fact that she was allowed to stay with her aunt and her aunt’s partner in the 1930s and 1940s, when she was a child, indicates that her mother had no fundamental objection to her aunt’s sexuality and knew about Anne’s. While Anne is sure that her mother was jealous of her closeness with her aunt, she did not phrase that jealousy in terms of antagonism to the aunt’s sexual orientation. Nor did her mother ever express any objection to Anne taking her female partners home to stay in the 1950s and 1960s, and she did not attempt to dissuade her from her sexual orientation.<sup>628</sup>

Lois, who was born in Victoria 1919, also felt that her family had known of her lesbianism. Lois “was a bit of a problem,” so she was sent to St. Margaret’s private school.<sup>629</sup> Part of her “problem,” it seems, was her affection for girls, which was sufficiently obvious that her older sister commented on it when Lois was eleven. Lois had had crushes on girls from a very young age and had talked to her sister about them. Her sister, while not exactly in favour, did not reject Lois out of hand but did suggest to her that same-sex crushes were not normal. Lois also believes that her parents knew of her lesbianism.

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<sup>628</sup> Anne, personal interview, 1 May 1998.

<sup>629</sup> Lois, personal interview, 3 October 1998.

The tide clearly was turning against lesbian relationships, yet women of the 1930s and 1940s were able to decide not to get married, but rather to follow their passions, with only moderate public condemnation compared to that which would come in the next decade. Increasing female employment allowed young women to leave home and live in same-sex environments. Prevailing gender norms made same-sex living for women socially acceptable, as long as open lesbian sexuality or gender transgression was not present. The Canadian public had to be trained slowly to view female relationships with an eye to lesbian content. Many parents remained ignorant of the possibility, or saw it as something that could exist outside their family, but not within it. Consequently, many lesbians were able to begin their sexual lives with other girls or women without fear of being caught.

Tolerance may particularly have occurred in the case of girls growing up lesbian in rural areas, which remained somewhat out of the reach of the tabloid newspapers. Parents were perhaps even less likely than their urban counterparts to be able to identify “pathological” behaviours early on. While they might have been concerned about their daughters’ gender-bending behaviours, for example, the lesser availability of media discussions of links between that and lesbianism might have made them slightly more tolerant and inclined to see it in terms of temporary “tomboy” behaviour. This can only be a tentative suggestion, however, as we lack testimonies from rural parents which would support or refute such a suggestion. Barb’s gender-bending behaviour was tolerated by her parents, who saw nothing unusual in it. While Barb was able to take advantage of her rural surroundings and engage in the sorts of activities and gender performance that a young boy would have been allowed, her appearance would, in the following decade, have been likely to cause suspicion and comment. In the 1930s and 1940s, however, Barb was merely a curiosity, a tomboy who supposedly would grow out of it.

Barb’s relationship with her family remained a positive and happy one, even though she was aware that she had to keep her attraction towards women secret. The subject of lesbianism was not addressed in her family, and she therefore did not have a name to put to the feelings she

was having. Nor did any situations arise in which her lesbianism was revealed to family. It was not until Barb joined the armed services in 1952 that she heard much of lesbianism. She made friends with a group of five other lesbian servicewomen. In 1954, one of the women, under questioning, offered up the names of the rest of the group. Barb was hauled in to see a psychiatrist and, after an attempt to cover up her sexuality, was forced to admit that she was a lesbian, and was discharged.<sup>630</sup> When asked how she had known what would be the consequences of telling the truth, Barb said that she could not remember specifically reading anything, but she had the distinct impression that “At that time, that was bad, bad, bad. Anybody caught you on your job, or any place, you know, that wasn’t the right thing. In other words, you were queer, that was the whole thing, I think, you just weren’t a normal person.”<sup>631</sup>

There existed considerable antagonism towards same-sex relationships in the Canadian military in the postwar period. As representatives of the nation, of courage and honour, and of respectability, servicemen and servicewomen were subject to intense scrutiny of their sexual behaviour and gender performances. Any suspicion of a gay or lesbian relationship could provoke severe censure if not immediate dismissal.<sup>632</sup> Luckily, Barb was not asked to explain

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<sup>630</sup> These events are discussed more fully in Chapter Five.

<sup>631</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

<sup>632</sup> Little work has yet been done on the experiences of lesbians in the Canadian military. Ruth Roach Pierson reveals, in *They’re Still Women After All* that lesbians were forced to leave the military during the war. Much greater detail on the armed services during the war and the post-war period is offered by Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire*, 148-154 & 181-183. Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile are at present working on an examination of the national security campaigns in Canada, the preliminary findings of which have been published as *“In the Interests of the State”: The Anti-gay, Anti-lesbian National Security Campaign in Canada: A Preliminary Research Report* (Sudbury, Ontario: Laurentian University, 1998). The subject of the security campaigns has also been explored in Daniel J. Robinson & David Kimmel, “The Queer Career of Homosexual Security Vetting in Cold War Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 75, 3 (Sept. 1994), 319-345.

her military discharge to her family, as she had voluntarily left and thus received an honourable discharge, and she remained close to them throughout this period of her life.

The threat of family reaction to her sexuality was an important consideration for Cheryl, and unfortunately was a tool of abuse in her relationship with her first partner. Cheryl had been at pains to keep the nature of her relationship secret, as she feared the reaction of her parents, and most particularly of her strict father. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, it was that threat that kept her bound to the abusive relationship for so long. When Cheryl joined the air force, Robyn attempted to stop her leaving by once again raising the spectre of family condemnation. This time, however, Cheryl stood her ground. She realized that her parents would love her no matter what Robyn had to tell them: "I suppose, at eighteen years of age came wisdom. I finally smartened up...I said 'My family love me and if you tell them, they will probably be hurt, but they love me and it is not going to make them love me any less. So go ahead and tell them if you want to.'"<sup>633</sup>

Billie is sure that her parents knew of her sexuality, as the subject had been discussed. In the 1940s, when Billie was young, her mother and her aunt had revealed to her that they had both had sexual relationships with women. The implication at the time was that it was a stage that she would pass through, but the fact that the subject was raised at all suggests that her mother and aunt had seen in Billie some signs of lesbian behaviour. Their addressing it so frankly and revealing that they themselves had had same-sex experiences was very unusual for the time. While Billie's relationship with her parents was made problematic by the household tension resulting from her mother's affairs, it was not made problematic by Billie's sexuality. Moreover, later in life, when Billie began to live fully as a lesbian, her parents did not react negatively.

After the Second World War, public discourse about gender and sexuality began to change more rapidly amid societal fears about the results of the war for heteronormativity. By

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<sup>633</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 24 November 1998.

the 1950s, a new gender ideology was finding expression at least as forceful as had been the exhortation of separate spheres in the nineteenth century. Gender and sexual nonconformity were now seen as signs of deeper ills, both in the individual and in the nation. As the nation was built on the foundation of the nuclear family, the relationship between parents and children was increasingly the focus of normative propaganda. Some of that propaganda addressed the subject of homosexuality. Most material was about male homosexuality, but lesbians were the subject of an increasing number of articles in the media. The new discourse of sexuality began to posit lesbians more forcefully as antagonists to the family, as both the result and the agents of family breakdown. Mary Louise Adams' *The Trouble With Normal* sets the increasing normalization of matrimonial heterosexuality within a framework of a postwar domestic "revival," in which deviance "precluded the homogenization that was seen to be central to Canada's strength as a nation."<sup>634</sup>

Lesbians' relationship to family life began fundamentally to change in this new era of coercive heteronormativity. Whereas in earlier times the concept of family obligation and the lack of female financial independence (or, indeed, the family's need to rely on a daughter's income) might have militated against a family's wish to expel a daughter because of her sexuality, the new discourse allowed families more and more to see their lesbian daughters as enemies, and as threats to the further stability of the family home. Family tensions could be alleviated by physical distance, and the growing employment of young women allowed lesbians to move away from their families perhaps a little more easily than had earlier been the case. This was particularly the case for young middle-class women.

Lesbians took advantage of new employment opportunities and sought work and refuge from their families in the burgeoning metropolises of Toronto, Montréal, and Vancouver. Both middle- and working-class women sought new opportunities which included the ability to live by

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<sup>634</sup> Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*, 23.

oneself or with other women rather than with family. Some women were less able to find work than others because of their gender performance and their very visible lesbianism. For butch women, who most clearly transgressed the boundaries of gender, employment opportunities were few. In Toronto, they were restricted to such jobs as driving trucks and labouring.<sup>635</sup> They often were supported financially by femmes or by other butch women in the community.

### **Lesbians, Families, and Psychologists**

In the 1950s and 1960s, psychiatry and psychology were heralded as virtual miracle cures for a variety of mental diseases and aberrant behaviours, including sexual ones. Many new methods of treatment were to arise for psychiatric illnesses generally, but the various sexual pathologies were thought to warrant particularly aggressive aversion therapies. While gay men bore the brunt of most of the postwar attack on homosexuality, lesbians had also to endure institutionalization and outpatient treatment because of their sexuality.

Psychology and psychiatry were vital parts of the postwar re-emphasis of heteronormativity. Before the war, “medical and psychiatric investigations of homosexuality were primarily limited to the pages of professional journals, while the general public’s perception of the homosexual—usually male—was shaped by sensational news stories about the sex criminal or religious morality tales about the sex sinner.”<sup>636</sup> In the postwar period, medical opinion on homosexuality rapidly infiltrated public thinking via the mainstream media. Much of that opinion rested on assumptions about the intimate link between homosexuality and abnormal or unhealthy family life, assumptions supported, and to a degree created by, the leading psychological theorists of the day. The new era made images of lesbians and their social worlds

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<sup>635</sup> Elise Chenier, “Tough Ladies and Troublemakers,” 133-134.

<sup>636</sup> Kate Adams, “Making the World Safe for the Missionary Position: Images of the Lesbian in Post-World War II America,” in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, eds. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York & London: New York University Press, 1990), 264.

more available to young women coming to terms with their sexuality; it also meant that many families now had a name to put to their daughters' behaviours, and a socially-approved framework within which to respond.

That framework sometimes involved psychiatric or psychological treatment. Several of the women in this study were required to see a psychiatrist or psychologist, particularly those working-class women interviewed by the Lesbians Making History Project. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this project to reveal or account for any class differences in the degree to which lesbians were forced into psychiatric treatment. What can be said is that the discourse of lesbian pathology was used against all lesbians. The butch lesbians of the working-class bar culture were perhaps more the targets of that discourse, however, because their gender performance marked them so clearly both as masculine women and as sexualized lesbians. Jan, for example, was threatened with committal because of her gender performance: "They phoned my family up and they said, 'Did you know that your sister's been seen in Toronto and she's dressing like a man?' My brother came looking for me, my older brother and my older sister. And I met them and they said, 'We're going to put you in the fucking nuthouse: look at you!'"<sup>637</sup>

Tricia, who came out to her family accidentally, was also assumed to be mentally ill. Her mother's tone during a telephone conversation had suggested to Tricia that she knew of Tricia's lesbianism, when in fact her mother had thought that Tricia was going out with a black man. Thinking that her mother had guessed her sexual orientation, Tricia started talking about it. Tricia had been a tomboy when she was growing up, and later had been given a copy of *The Well of Loneliness* by her mother, which might have suggested to Tricia that her mother had had some suspicions.<sup>638</sup> Upon revealing her sexual orientation, Tricia was told to see a psychiatrist.

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<sup>637</sup> Jan, LMH interview, 19 October 1985.

<sup>638</sup> Tricia, LMH interview, 21 September 1986.

“What psychiatrists do to lesbians is a crime,” commented Pat. She remembered that when her father first found out that she was a lesbian when she returned to Montréal from New York, he took her “to a doctor, but unbeknownst to me, didn’t tell me it was a psychiatrist. So I walked into this office, and this guy asked me all kinds of silly questions, you know, about my childhood and everything, and it clicked finally that it was a psychiatrist.” The psychiatrist called Pat’s father in and told him that “‘really, she is a lesbian and she married just to hide it from her family, and in her upbringing you certainly didn’t help the situation.’” Pat’s father pulled her out of the office, saying “‘That idiot doesn’t know what he’s talking about.’”<sup>639</sup> The psychiatrist had actually been correct, at least about Pat’s sexuality and her false marriage, but his linking that sexuality to her upbringing had given Pat’s father a means by which to reject the message, for no parent wanted to see themselves as responsible for such a terrible fate.

That Pat lied about her sexuality might, from an early twenty-first century perspective, seem to indicate that she was repressing her sexual orientation and was caving in to heteronormativity. One must be careful, however, not to assume that what would be regarded as closetedness today was the same fifty years ago. For Pat to admit her lesbianism at that particular juncture in Canadian history, when sexual “deviance” was increasing under the purview of psychiatrists and psychologists, could have meant committal or at least parental pressure to undergo therapy. That Pat’s father had taken her to the psychiatrist in the first place suggests that he would have deemed treatment appropriate. Lying about one’s sexuality in these kinds of circumstance can therefore be seen as conscious self-protection and acknowledgement of one’s sexuality rather than as the negation of it. Pat had no intention of changing her behaviour; she wished merely to avoid psychiatric treatment because of it.

Jerry moved to Toronto at the age of fifteen after receiving a hostile reaction to her sexuality. “I was accused of being a lesbian at the age of 13 by my mother,” Jerry said. She

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<sup>639</sup> Pat and Mary, joint personal interview, 26 September 1998.

continued, “this woman, her name was S. She had a pyjama party one night and there was 2 other, 3 other women I think. And S. and I got pretty heavy duty on the chesterfield.”<sup>640</sup> Jerry had known fully what lesbianism was, and had beneath her mattress at home two books about lesbian relationships, yet she was careful to deny knowledge when asked by her father and several doctors. After she left home, Jerry’s father said to her sister, ““Your sister’s a lesbian and I don’t want her anywhere near my house. I don’t want her anywhere near you.””<sup>641</sup> Jerry’s father was in the air force, and might reasonably be expected to have had somewhat greater knowledge of homosexuality than many in the general public, given the high-profile purging of gay men and later of lesbians in the military.<sup>642</sup> He certainly was in command of a wider range of terminology for homosexuality than many would have been, frequently lamenting the fact that his daughter was “queer.”<sup>643</sup>

Arlene discovered lesbians in the psychiatric hospital, after her mother had her committed in 1962. She was sixteen. She had been “fooling around” with girls since the age of nine, but had not known what a lesbian was until she met several lesbian patients on the ward.<sup>644</sup> At nine, she and her best friend had started acting out the love scenes they saw at the movies. When she was ten, her friend’s mother walked in on them making love, asked “What are you doing?,” and then started to scream. Arlene fled the house, went home, and overdosed on her mother’s sleeping pills. While it would appear that her friend’s mother did not discuss the matter

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<sup>640</sup> Jerry, LMH interview, 23 November 1992.

<sup>641</sup> Jerry , LMH interview, 23 November 1992.

<sup>642</sup> See Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire*, 148-212; Daniel J. Robinson and David Kimmel, “The Queer Career of Homosexual Security Vetting in Cold War Canada.”

<sup>643</sup> Jerry, LMH interview, 23 November 1992.

<sup>644</sup> Arlene, LHM interview, 6 May 1987.

with Arlene's mother, her friend was put in another school and Arlene ceased most of her lesbian activity until her introduction to lesbians in the hospital.<sup>645</sup>

Arlene revealed that she was committed the same year that she came out to her family as a lesbian, but said that the reason for the committal was that she was leaving home and her mother did not want her to. Despite the fact that her mother abused her physically, Arlene described her family as a "great one." She was able to tell her whole family, including her grandparents, "This is the way it is: I am a lesbian. I intend to stay one. You can either like me or not see me again."<sup>646</sup> As Elise Chenier comments, however, it is quite likely that her sexual preference was a factor in her mother's decision to have her committed.<sup>647</sup>

Although very difficult, her relationship with her mother was unusual for the time. Her mother insisted eventually on seeing what kind of life Arlene was living, and went with her to the lesbian bars at the Parkside and the Continental. "She just wanted to meet my friends, and see what atmosphere I was in," Arlene said. Her mother became so well known at the Parkside that she was referred to by the other lesbians as "The General" or "Mum." The bar community, according to Arlene, looked to her for assistance when they had problems. It was a different story, however, when it came to Arlene having sexual relationships. "We'd go three to six months with my mother right out of it. She wouldn't talk to me, she wouldn't talk to them."<sup>648</sup> Arlene accounted for this behaviour by suggesting that her mother was jealous of the relationship.

Another Toronto lesbian, Alice, mentioned a friend who was kicked out of a convent when she was sixteen and was discovered in bed with another girl: "And they threw her out

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<sup>645</sup> Arlene, LHM interview, 6 May 1987.

<sup>646</sup> Arlene, LHM interview, 6 May 1987.

<sup>647</sup> Elise Chenier, "Tough Ladies and Troublemakers," 84.

<sup>648</sup> Arlene, LHM interview, 6 May 1987.

because she wasn't Catholic. And her mother sent her to a psychiatrist and Betty lied to him."<sup>649</sup>

The threat of psychiatric treatment was also present for Shirley Limbert:

I was fifteen and proud and not very discreet. I smile to myself as I think of this. I'm still proud to be a lesbian and I'm working on being discreet. Eventually, my mother found out about my lover and me, and she was horrified. At that time, in the late fifties, psychiatric care was recommended as the 'cure' for lesbians. I don't think my mother would have gone as far as shock treatments for her only child—they were also considered a part of that 'cure'—but the threat was there.<sup>650</sup>

Barb and Cheryl, both of whom were required by the air force to see a psychiatrist to determine whether or not they were lesbian, did not have any ongoing psychiatric treatment. Once they left the air force, they were free to do as they pleased. They did not seek medical treatment, not believing that there was a problem to be treated. Furthermore, because their families did not know the reason for their discharge from the air force, there was not any family pressure for them to see psychiatrists.

Cheryl's previous partner, Robyn, however, did end up in the psychiatric ward after Cheryl had joined up. Robyn's experience may indicate to us that families could still be somewhat tolerant, even while accepting the psychological discourse regarding lesbianism. Stopping off in Toronto after her basic training, Cheryl found out that Robyn had been admitted to 999 Queen Street. Robyn's new lover informed Cheryl that it was all her fault, saying "you left her, and she just couldn't take it."<sup>651</sup> Apparently Robyn had become suicidal and eventually had to be committed. On Cheryl's first leave from her new base, she went to visit Robyn. Robyn seemed drugged but recognized her. On her second visit, Cheryl found that Robyn had been transferred to 2 Surrey Place, in the Women's College Hospital, and was even more drugged.

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<sup>649</sup> Alice, LHM interview, 16 November 1985.

<sup>650</sup> Shirley Limbert, "Coming Out x Three," in *Lesbian Parenting: Living With Pride & Prejudice*, ed. Katherine Arnup (Charlottetown: Gynergy Books, 1995), p. 269.

<sup>651</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

Robyn's mother had travelled to Toronto as soon as she had heard that she was ill. She and Cheryl got along well, and Robyn's mother informed Cheryl that Robyn had thought that she and Cheryl “would be together like your Mum and Dad are together.”<sup>652</sup> Robyn's mother clearly was sympathetic enough to visit her daughter in the psychiatric ward and saw her daughter's lesbian relationships as similar in some ways to heterosexual ones, but she did not necessarily approve of her daughter's sexual orientation.

These testimonies reveal that even those lesbians who most clearly transgressed the boundaries of heteronormativity were not necessarily cast outside the family, but that attitudes towards lesbians had changed somewhat from the previous decades. Even though many women remained in touch with their families, family concern about their sexuality could be explicit and overt. The new arguments of homosexual pathology clearly were available to parents and were part and parcel of their reactions to their daughters' behaviour. Whereas in earlier decades opposition could be and was expressed, and some families attempted to keep women apart from one another, from the late 1950s on families had the added explanations and tools of the psychologists and psychiatrists with which to “understand,” describe and police their daughters' behaviour.

Examining the period 1910 to 1965, one sees a gradual shift in the relationship between lesbians and their families. The familial relationships of Frieda, Bud, Anne and Lois were often difficult because of their sexuality—particularly in the cases of Frieda and Bud—but at no time were these women rejected outright by their families, and nor was there any suggestion that their behaviour required medical attention. Other women, such as Barb and Cheryl, knew very well that they had to keep their relationships secret because of the potential for family disapproval, but the potential disapproval was not based on psychological discourse. It would not be until they were in the services that this new discourse would become linked with their sexuality.

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<sup>652</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

It is in the testimonies of women whose families came to know of their sexuality in the 1950s and 1960s that one sees the linking of lesbianism with notions of pathology and illness. Family reactions to Jackie, Pat, Jerry and Arlene were clearly based in psychological discourse. Families both understood lesbian sexuality in these terms and sought to police their daughters' sexuality via psychiatric treatment. One sees here a subtle change from previous forms of relationship between lesbians and families: while relationships before 1950 were difficult, they lacked the coercive threat of family rejection and psychiatric treatment which was beginning to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s. Families were exposed to and used the new terms in reaction to lesbian daughters, and their behaviour changed as a result. It is not that reactions prior to 1950 were not negative, but rather that the changes in the postwar era resulted in a greater distancing between families and lesbian daughters than had previously been the case.

In the early twentieth century, several factors militated against families of origin rejecting outright their lesbian daughters. There existed perhaps a stronger sense of obligation within some families, although it would be difficult to assess the degree to which this was true across class boundaries, given the paucity of records of working-class women for the years before the Second World War. What is more important, however, is the impact of the postwar discourse about homosexuality. Whereas before the war, families often condemned lesbian relationships with rather vague reasons for their views, the postwar era gave families a new terminology, and an extremely hostile one, with which to reject their daughters' sexuality. In addition, one might suggest that the expanding world of women's work allowed a diminishing of family obligation in the sense that more women could be financially independent. For families, this made the expulsion of the lesbian daughter from the family home less objectionable. The rising standard of living in the postwar era might also have made it easier for some families to give up their daughters' incomes, and the tradition of children living at home giving over their wage packets at the end of the week had eroded. Daughters' incomes were usually now their own. For lesbians, this meant the opening up of the possibility of living one's own life without the scrutiny of

family members. Many working-class women in particular moved to Canada's cities both for the employment opportunities and also because they could live as lesbians within the emerging lesbian communities.

Certainly, economic independence was a significant factor in forming lesbian relationships and community in the postwar period. Donna Penn argues that "For women, fashioning a lesbian way of life generally required economic independence from men, a situation increasingly possible in the wartime and postwar cities."<sup>653</sup> Chenier suggests that

Although the military offered women and men alike a unique opportunity to explore and develop same-sex relationships, in Toronto, as in Buffalo, it was the integration of civilian women into blue collar labour industries rather than the homosocial environment of military life that facilitated the formation of public lesbian communities.<sup>654</sup>

Economic independence allowed several of the narrators in this study to live with their partners in the postwar years and even to purchase homes together. Their financial reliance on family was minimal, and consequently they were able to move not only out of the homes in which they had been raised, but in many cases across the country or even from other countries to Canada, allowing them to live lesbian lives completely out of the view of their families.

Ideologues of the postwar era in Canada tried very hard to instil in family life an antagonism towards those who strayed from the path of heterosexual matrimony, yet they were only partially successful. Many lesbians did, indeed, suffer the consequences of the new, psychological arguments, and were marginalized and institutionalized on the basis of their sexuality. Yet, as the sources for this study indicate, family remained important in the lives of many lesbians. The narrators' families did not absorb the new discourse to the degree that they cut ties with their daughters absolutely. It will be the task of further research to examine the degree to which this was true across the nation, and across lines of class and race.

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<sup>653</sup> Donna Penn, "The Sexualized Woman," 364.

<sup>654</sup> Elise Chenier, "Tough Ladies and Troublemakers," 37.

With the advent of the social movements of the late 1960s, however, change occurred in lesbians' relationships with their families of origin. Society had come, over the preceding two decades, to see lesbians as antithetical to the family, and lesbians began to see the traditional family as heterosexist. By the 1970s, lesbians could be singing "Family of Women We've Begun."<sup>655</sup> By the 1980s and 1990s, one could speak of "lesbian parenting" and "lesbian families" as viable alternatives to the traditional normative family.<sup>656</sup> These ideas are a positive interpretation of lesbian life, in which lesbians are seen once again as capable of family life, albeit with a twist, and yet this positive development has its origin in the gradual separation of lesbians from the family unit in the postwar era. Born in antagonism, the alternative lesbian family is the result of a decades-old struggle between lesbian identity and notions of family life.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the nature and quality of same-sex relationships between women and of lesbian relationships with families of origin before 1965. Relationships varied in their nature according to class and individual circumstance, but many of the same pressures existed for same-sex couples as did for heterosexual ones. As in the case of heterosexual couples, finding a partner, courtship, and maintaining a relationship were important to lesbians. Alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, and infidelity affected some relationships between women, just as they did some heterosexual relationships. Gender differentiation also occurred in both heterosexual and same-sex relationships, although the degree and nature of that differentiation varied in the lesbian community according to class status.

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<sup>655</sup> Title of a Linda Shear song, cited in Becki Ross, *The House That Jill Built*, 57, 258n.

<sup>656</sup> Katherine Arnup, ed., *Lesbian Parenting: Living with Pride & Prejudice* is the most recent Canadian work to explore the creation of alternative families on the basis of parenting by lesbians.

Relationships with family were also important in the lives of many lesbians, as they were for many heterosexual people. Rather than adopting the common assumption that women before 1965 lived with overwhelming condemnation of their sexuality, however, I argue here that the absence of a strong public and medicalized discourse, particularly before the late 1950s, made family reaction to lesbianism rather more muted and unspecified than might be expected. While a homophobic discourse was by no means absent before the popularity of Freudian and other medicalized views in the 1950s, opposition to lesbianism was based on somewhat vague grounds. Not yet in evidence was the pathologizing discourse that would result in many a lesbian being sent to psychiatrists from the late 1950s onwards. Many lesbians in this earlier period were therefore able to maintain at the very least civil relationships with their families, even when families suspected their daughters' aberrant sexuality.

These two types of relationship—romantic and familial—were crucial to the formation of lesbian subjectivities in the period under study. In a period in which a positive and public recognition of the validity of lesbian identity was absent, in which there were no lesbian role models for young women, and in which lesbian relationships were seen *inter alia* as inherently unstable, a romantic relationship with another girl or woman was an affirmation of shared sexuality, emotional health, and mutual desire. This is not to suggest that a lesbian subjectivity could not develop in the absence of a relationship, but rather that a relationship was an external recognition and validation of that subjectivity. It was in same-sex relationships that women both diverged from the social norm and simultaneously came within it, in the sense of locating themselves within the paradigm of long-term partnership. While a same-sex relationship placed them outside the bounds of heteronormativity, it gave them what every girl was socialized to want: an intimate and emotional relationship. Provided that one could resist any suggestion that such a relationship was an illness or a sin, a same-sex relationship allowed one to see oneself as participating in the very important world of dating, romance, and even life-long commitment.

Barb, Pat, Cheryl, Mary and Deborah in particular experienced very strong same-sex attractions and were able to explore them as children. Unlike some of the other narrators who also experimented sexually with other girls but whose experiences were short-lived, their same-sex experiences involved longer emotional relationships, which may have made them more generative of lesbian subjectivity. After all, physical experimentation could be discounted as mere curiosity or as a phase, something that many children were not supposed to do but did anyway (like masturbation). An emotional and physical relationship was quite another matter. It involved the same kind of activities as “going steady” with a boy.

It was these women, who had established emotional as well as physical relationships with other girls, who continued to have relationships with women, who found lesbian community early in their lives, and who had an early awareness of their subjectivity based on sexual orientation. Other narrators, who had not had lengthy or happy same-sex experiences, may have known about their desires and acted on them occasionally but did not form a subjectivity based on same-sex attraction until later in life. It was the affirmation, then, of the emotional content of early relationships rather than sex itself which was the more formative of subjectivity.

In the context of these women’s lives, that emotion should have been more consequential than sex is perhaps not surprising. After all, it was with images of emotion, rather than sex, that these women were raised. They, like heterosexual women, were trained to view as ideal marriage and emotional commitment. They were not trained to see sex as separate from emotional commitment, and they most particularly were not trained to see sexual activity as related to any kind of sexual orientation. Although desirous of other girls and women, it was emotional connection they craved and which was the more crucial in their formation of subjectivity.

This same period in Canadian history was one without a family structure alternative to the heterosexual, patriarchal family unit. Prior to lesbian-feminism, there were two choices for lesbians in relation to family: maintained communication with family, and absence of family.

Family relationships, while problematic for many in this study because of tensions arising from sexuality, were largely not abandoned. There was no structure at this time which could replace them, no alternative family in which women could feel that they could openly be lesbian and still belong to “family”. Duty to family was still a prized value, and sense of family obligation was strong. Lesbian subjectivities had therefore to negotiate between sexual orientation and family obligation, between openness and compromise, and between maintenance of family ties and loss of the “rootedness” family brought.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **“So there seems to be a fair amount of it about”: Community Among Lesbians, 1910-1965**

Despite the increasing condemnation of same-sex relationships by both medical professionals and lay people in the twentieth century, women did form both brief and lasting relationships with other women. One of the benefits of wider female movement in the twentieth century was the rise in the number of opportunities lesbian and bisexual women had to meet others like themselves. It is difficult to determine how women in this period “spotted” other lesbian and bisexual women, but nevertheless they did find each other and group together socially on the basis of their same-sex relationships. Many were lucky enough to be able to find enough women like themselves to form broad social communities. This chapter examines the formation of such communities in Canada, their relationship to class structure, and their internal structures based on gender roles.

Any analysis of lesbian and bisexual community before the late 1960s must take into account the constraints on women’s movement and economic independence which existed before the changes of the 1970s. While women did have considerably more freedom of movement and economic opportunity than had women of the nineteenth century, it was still expected that the majority of a woman’s life would be spent in economic dependence on a man. And while female friendships were important, they were not to replace the primary relationship with the male breadwinner. The coming together of large groups of women in any setting was therefore not ideal. The majority of women who formed relationships with women did so in isolation or in the context of small social groupings, rather than in any kind of mass movement.

The concept of “community” must therefore be a nuanced one, in which it is recognized that communities of lesbians and bisexual women before 1965 were not as large as later ones, and nor did they have the same sort of self-aware political agenda and “alternative” ideology that would come to predominate in lesbian-feminist communities. For the purposes of this study, I

define lesbian and bisexual “community” as any social grouping, long-term or temporary, from a few women to hundreds, based on shared desires for women or, in the case of bisexual women, for women as well as for men. Community in this sense does not require a political agenda, public recognition of existence, or geographical focus in particular areas of cities. It may simply be the coming together of a few friends in a small social network based on the recognition that those friends share an attraction towards women. Community can also mean very large groups of women sharing a particular type of social gathering based on their attraction to other women.

This chapter explores several different communities of lesbians and bisexual women in Canada from 1910 to 1965, from small groups of middle-class friends in the early part of the century who shared a “devotion” to other women, to the working-class and public bar scene of downtown Toronto in the 1940s and 1950s, to the “respectable” house-parties of thirty to fifty women held in more suburban areas. In all of these cases, the women discussed formed friendships and social networks based on their same-sex desires. While this is not lesbian or bisexual community in the modern, political sense—one with a shared *identity* rather than simply a shared sexual practice, with clear and sustained boundaries between itself and the broader society, with minority status and a shared and often voiced sense of disadvantage, and with its own cultural norms of behaviour—it did provide women with the sense that they were not alone, that they shared their attractions to women with others, and that they could find at least a few people in the world with whom they could express who they were. This is, I argue, community.

Canadian lesbians, such as those discussed in this study, could not be said to have a formalized community structure based on lesbian identity before perhaps the 1950s. Prior to the 1950s, incipient lesbian communities were, however, formed in relation to a subjectivity based on shared same-sex desire, even if the evidence suggests that identity labels were not used. Women’s limited access to public venues, unless they were accompanied by men, and the restrictions of their residential accommodation meant that few were able to form the sort of public networks that men could, with their greater mobility and economic opportunity. It was,

however, possible for many women at least to live and socialize together and even to recognize others like themselves.

Even though they were based on a shared characteristic—sexual attraction—communities were not homogeneous units. One must be careful to recognize that communities of lesbian and bisexual women were, in the years before second-wave feminism, at least as divided along lines of class and race as they are in the present day. This chapter examines primarily the class differences between white lesbians. The overwhelming majority of studies of lesbian history have focused on but two groups: poor, white, working-class lesbians and white upper middle-class lesbians. But there existed in Canada a substantial middle-class lesbian world outside the universities, government departments and public welfare organizations on the one hand, and the downtown bars on the other. That social world has, until now, remained unexplored. The interviews conducted for this study allow me to compare this lower middle-class world with those of upper middle-class and working-class women, thus providing a fuller understanding of the role of class in lesbian subjectivity than has hitherto been possible for Canada.

This chapter examines in particular the importance of separation from bar culture in lower middle-class lesbians' constructions of subjectivity. I analyse the bar as a crucial line of demarcation between “respectable” and “rough” lesbians in the postwar era and argue that respectability and distance from bar life were key elements in the self-identification of lower middle-class lesbian women. Much research has examined the 1970s lesbian-feminist disapproval of the butch/femme bar women, yet disapproval had been present within lesbian communities since at least 1940.<sup>657</sup> Pre-feminist disapproval was not based on gender analysis,

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<sup>657</sup> Many scholars have discussed lesbian-feminist criticisms of the bar culture, and particularly of the butch/femme relationship that formed its basis. See, for example, Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*; Sheila Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Heresy: A Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution* (Melbourne: Spinifex, 1993); Elise Chenier, “Tough Ladies and Troublemakers”; Joan Nestle, ed., *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992); and Becki Ross, *The House That Jill Built*. Criticisms of the butch-femme relationship and culture are examined in this chapter, and in Chapters Three and Four.

but rather was the result of class conflict and concerns about respectability. The interviews conducted for this study indicate that lower middle-class lesbians disapproved of the bar culture and that notions of respectability related to that disapproval were part and parcel of their constructions of self. An examination of their testimonies reveals that, by organizing their social lives in house parties away from the downtown core, or by visiting the bars only occasionally as “tourists”, lower middle-class lesbians created and maintained a class identity distinct from that of the bar women.

Divisions of race were also present within lesbian communities before 1965. In Canada, there were very few Aboriginal lesbians or lesbians of colour in the lesbian community before second-wave feminism, and even after that few felt fully comfortable in the lesbian community. Unlike the early twentieth-century bars and speakeasies of American cities, Canada’s mid-century gay and lesbian clubs were not often owned by people of colour. And although lesbian bars could be found in downtown areas such as Chinatowns, which often housed the greater proportion of cities’ non-white populations, people of non-European cultures did not necessarily form their clientele. As the film *Forbidden Love* reports, Aboriginal women were more likely to frequent those venues with larger numbers of Aboriginal patrons than they were the almost exclusively white lesbian bars. Women of colour might be entertainers, but not many of them were patrons.<sup>658</sup>

All the women interviewed for this study were white. No Aboriginal women came forward to be interviewed, and those women of colour who came forward were either too young for the study or had not been in Canada before 1965. Many narrators reported not knowing any lesbians of colour or Aboriginal lesbians during the period under study. That the majority of them were either middle-class or upper working-class would necessarily have reduced their

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<sup>658</sup> *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Story of Lesbian Lives*, Lynn Fernie & Aerlyn Weissman, dir., National Film Board of Canada, 1992.

chances of coming into contact with women of other races, since employment, social activities, and location of residence were intimately linked in the pre-1965 period to racial divisions as well as to those of class. Women of colour had access almost exclusively to working-class jobs in the period under study.

In addition to such factors as race and class, the very availability of information about the existence of lesbian communities affected women's ability to meet others like themselves. Many of the women interviewed for this study reported that they had no lesbian community in the years before second-wave feminism. In several cases, these women thought that they were alone or, once they had partners, that they and their lover were the only two in the world.<sup>659</sup> Their social worlds were thus largely heterosexual, and they kept their lesbian partnerships closeted from family and friends. For these women, the lack of information about the existence of lesbian communities and the prohibitions against same-sex love resulted in a closetedness that was not overcome until the creation of more "tolerant" attitudes after the gay rights movement and lesbian-feminism had pushed gay and lesbian communities more forcefully into public view. This chapter does not examine the testimonies of these more closeted women, but rather focuses on those women who did form community, either in small groups or in large ones, with other lesbians beyond their partners.

This chapter also does not examine bisexual communities as such, but rather the lives of individual bisexual women who socialized within lesbian communities. It would appear from some of the narrators' testimonies, and from those analysed by other scholars, that bisexual women, for the most part, were only moderately tolerated within lesbian communities and did not have communities of their own. Such an interpretation is certainly supported by analyses of American lesbian communities before 1965, and by studies of the 1970s lesbian-feminist

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<sup>659</sup> See Chapter Four for discussion of the relationships in which Phyl, Cheryl, Mary, and Magda thought that they and their partners were alone in the world.

community in Canada.<sup>660</sup> While a few of the women interviewed for this study acknowledged that their activities before 1965 were bisexual, they did not speak of holding bisexual identities at the time. Their interactions with other women were held not on the basis of a bisexual identity, but rather on the basis of shared attraction towards women. It would therefore be misleading to speak of the existence of bisexual community at this point in Canada's history. Bisexual histories must instead be drawn out from the histories of lesbian communities and given shape on their own.

### **The Formation of Lesbian Cultures**

A crucial element in the formation of both community and subjectivity was the gaining of information about lesbianism. Many lesbians, including some of the women interviewed for this study, were not part of a community before 1965 simply because they did not know that such things existed.<sup>661</sup> Some early twentieth-century lesbians who were aware of their attraction towards women were lucky enough to be able to read some of the emerging sexological and other literature in which homosexuality was discussed.<sup>662</sup> A case in point is Elsa Gidlow. Gidlow was born in England in 1898 and arrived in Quebec with her family in 1905. When she

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<sup>660</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* and Becki Ross, *The House That Jill Built*.

<sup>661</sup> Magda, for example, who had a relationship with her teacher in 1940 at age sixteen, knew nothing of lesbians and never sought contact outside of her relationship. Phyl and her partner thought that they were the only two in the world, and socialized only with heterosexual women. Despite increases in the amount of literature available about sexuality, and in the press coverage of gay activity, Magda and Phyl did not realize that there would be others like themselves, with whom they could form social networks. However, because the focus of this chapter is on those women who *did* find community, I shall not discuss Magda and Phyl here.

<sup>662</sup> Sexological literature had, of course, been in publication since the middle of the nineteenth century, but it was in the early to mid-twentieth century that its circulation began to expand from an almost exclusively medical readership to a larger readership among the general public.

was a teenager, she founded a literary study group. As mentioned in Chapter One, it was one of the members of that group, a gay man, who introduced her to the kind of reading that would tell her of other lesbians. She also remembered:

Roswell confided his personal crusade to me. He wanted people to understand that it was beautiful, not evil, to love others of one's own sex and make love with them. Roswell had divined my lesbian temperament and was happy to proselytize; the veil of self-ignorance began to lift.<sup>663</sup>

Gidlow's early community was, however, a small and male one. She was not to meet a large number of lesbian friends until the 1960s. Prior to this period, her contact with others like herself was extremely restricted, particularly as her social class would have precluded her involvement in any of the postwar urban bar cultures.

Almost nothing is known about the existence of lesbian communities in Canada before the early 1940s. Because of the lack of female participation in same-sex sexual activities in public areas, such as parks and toilets, and the limitations on female use of bars and clubs, there exists almost no information about lesbian social activities before the war and the changing world of work in the postwar era brought women together in larger numbers than ever before. Those works examining the bar cultures of Montréal and Toronto, discussed later in this chapter, were the first to discuss the topic of lesbian community.

Ross Higgins and Line Chamberland have shown that the "yellow press" of the 1950s and 1960s, while supporting and disseminating negative stereotypes of gays and lesbians, also helped to form the very communities they were describing. It was these papers to which women and men could turn to find out where the bars were, and in which they saw others like themselves portrayed, however oddly. Their study of Montréal scandal sheets shows that lesbians and gay men used the papers to give them access to personal contacts and to the bar

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<sup>663</sup> Elsa Gidlow, *Elsa: I Come With My Songs*, 72-73.

scene, even while many papers were adopting a tone of moral outrage to sell more copies to a prurient heterosexual public.<sup>664</sup>

Few of the women interviewed for this study read the “yellow press” newspapers. They were not exposed to the lurid accounts of gay and lesbian clubs, scandals, and court cases and had instead to locate their communities in other ways. Nor did they read much about lesbians in the more reputable publications. They therefore remained almost untouched by the trend described by many historians of negative media portrayal contributing to the growth of unwanted subcultures. They relied for the most part on informal networks; once they had found one individual, either lesbian or gay, who was “in the scene,” they were able to meet others. Only some had known, because of novels or casual gossip, that they should look for gay and lesbian bars and clubs. Others stumbled upon lesbian communities accidentally, or made their own communities by linking up with a small network of colleagues and friends who shared their sexual orientation.

Those women whose relationships were formed in the period before urban lesbian communities established themselves, and before newspapers publicized their existence, faced even greater challenges finding others like themselves. They had to rely exclusively on personal networks and the limited range of social opportunities available to them. The written sources for this study from such women. Their relationships were formed in an era before the urban bar culture arose. A rather different definition of “community” must be applied in their case. In addition to the more common interpretation of community—as a large group of individuals who share a common experience and may even be located in a relatively small geographical area—the historian must learn to see as community spoken and unspoken recognition of same-sex attraction, the development of linguistic and dress codes, and feelings of comradeship and shared experience, even among very small groups of people. This, too, is community in the sense that

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<sup>664</sup> Ross Higgins and Line Chamberland, “Mixed Messages: Gays and Lesbians in Montréal Yellow Papers in the 1950s,” 428-430.

bonds, albeit often temporary, were being formed and women were socializing with other women on the basis of a shared experience of attraction towards women.

### **Upper Middle-Class Community**

Middle-class lesbian women were able to recognize each other within middle-class social milieux. Precisely what “signs” they looked for in other women is difficult to determine, but there do exist fragments of evidence which suggest that there did exist linguistic conventions and visible identifiers which aided in recognition. For example, while travelling with her friend Bess on a cruise ship in Europe, Bud Williams reported that

Bess picked up the nicest women from the hospital on board—two nurses, Miss Brown and Miss Scadding. They are head nurses at T.G.H. and quite old—about 45!!—They are very devoted to each other which is enough to make me interested in them even if they weren’t such perfect lambs. I was quite thrilled when they said that they had known each other for years and had always planned this trip, and had only managed it this year, and you could tell by the way they looked at each other, just how thrilled they were.<sup>665</sup>

How exactly Bess “spotted” the Misses Brown and Scadding is not known, since it does not seem from the source material that Bess was herself lesbian or bisexual, but it would seem that they became reasonably friendly towards Bud, in whom they confided that their families had been awfully against their being together so much when they were young but after 20 years they are beginning to get used to it. It is an awfully difficult subject to chat about and it would never be approached if I had to do it, but they suddenly began to talk about it to-day.<sup>666</sup>

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<sup>665</sup> University of Toronto Archives (UTA), Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 30 June 1925. Emphasis in original.

<sup>666</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 July 1925.

Bud commented to her partner Frieda that her new friends “seem to agree with all we think about it, and also that there is no use trying to convince any other people about it—they simply can’t see it.”<sup>667</sup> Bud and the Misses Brown and Scadding clearly shared a sense of their difference from mainstream society and an awareness of their shared experience based on same-sex relationships. While Bud might simply have connected with most people as fellow travellers, she clearly allied herself with the two women because of their relationship. A temporary social relationship, it nevertheless speaks to the importance of recognizing and being recognized as women devoted to other women. Bud and Frieda write often about such women, and in quite some detail. That the subject should interest them so greatly shows that finding others like themselves was important to their constructions of self and their confidence in the rightness of their relationship.

Bud’s early letters to Frieda spoke often of women’s devotion to each other. During her stay in England in 1925, she wrote to Frieda regarding her aunt’s cook and housemaid, revealing that her aunt

told me that her cook and housemaid—who are by way of being ladies—had never had jobs before, but that their families had been rather disagreeable about their being awfully devoted and so they had up and left, and this was the only thing they could do. However, they loved it as it meant living together. So there seems to be a fair amount of it about. And they were certainly the happiest looking creatures. I simply pined to talk to them about it. Aunt F. didn’t like it much, but at the time she was ill and couldn’t get anyone else who could get on with her nurse and her companion, but she seems to be quite satisfied now. I asked her what her objection was and she said that is wasn’t natural! Isn’t it funny?<sup>668</sup>

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<sup>667</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 2 July 1925.

<sup>668</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds II, Box 010, File 03, Edith Bickerton Williams to Frieda Fraser, 22 August 1925.

Frieda discovered women who were “devoted” to one another while she was working as a doctor in New York during the late 1920s. She wrote to Bud concerning “two middle-aged & very good looking females that spend all their week-ends together here.”<sup>669</sup>

These statements indicate that the language of “devotion,” which arose out of the nineteenth-century romantic friendship, operated as a sign of a relationship existing between two women as well as a description of its nature. In other words, the use of such terminology operated in the same way as a red necktie or the word “gay” operated within certain circles in the same period—as a signifier of “queerness.”<sup>670</sup> If a shared attraction towards women was suspected in another woman, a middle-class lesbian of the early twentieth century could drop the phrase “awfully devoted” into a conversation, knowing that it most likely would be ignored by those not “in the know” but clearly would be recognized by other lesbian women. It seems reasonable to assume, especially given the frequency with which Bud and Frieda use the phrase and identify others using it, that middle-class lesbians had, in this linguistic code, a lesbian signifier.

Frieda and Bud, like many a lesbian woman, were also quick to notice women who travelled about in pairs. This is not to suggest that all such women were lesbian, but rather that women with an awareness of their own same-sex desires noticed women whose primary companions were female rather than male, and then looked for further signs of a same-sex relationship. To many in mainstream society, even in a period of increasing suspicion of female friendships, two women travelling together were of little interest; to a lesbian woman, they were—unless obviously related to one another or behaving heterosexually—a red flag and were noticed immediately.

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<sup>669</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 36, File 11, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 5 March 1927.

<sup>670</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 52.

The emerging professions, such as the medical profession of which Frieda was a part, were frequently (and probably rightly) held to be rife with female-female relationships, especially when women boarded together in large numbers. Any employment or educational institution which brought women into contact with other, unrelated women provided opportunities for same-sex attractions to be realized. Faderman argues that “women who live by their brains” were frequently drawn to each other.<sup>671</sup> Frieda Fraser found such an example in her medical colleague Miss Lawter. In 1927, she wrote to Bud that “Miss Lawter had dinner with me today. I am simply bursting to ask whether her partnership with Miss Cook is disapproved of. If I were you I would know all about it by now.”<sup>672</sup>

It should be noted that Bud and Frieda, while being able to notice and connect socially with other women like themselves, did not then form a stable community network with them. There was community in the sense that lesbians by this time already shared common behavioural and visible characteristics, such that they were able to recognize one another, but that community was fleeting and was not based on a formalized internal structure, consciously realized and rigorously policed, the like of which arose after the Second World War.

It also was a form of community predicated on gender norms of middle-class and educated women of the day. While Frieda was quite masculine in appearance compared to Bud, she did not dress in men’s clothes per se. Her style of dress was one adopted by many middle-class women of the 1920s. Both she and Bud would have been horrified by the butch and femme couples they would have seen a decade or two later. The gender norms of the working-class lesbian community signified their sexuality in a way that was largely unacceptable to middle-class women, both in the period in which butch and femme roles came to the fore and in the earlier decades during which Frieda and Bud were writing. Devotion, as they called it, was not

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<sup>671</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 226-227.

<sup>672</sup> UTA, Fraser Family Personal Records, sous-fonds III, Box 36, File 11, Frieda Fraser to Edith Bickerton Williams, 14 March 1927.

something to be worn publicly and outlandishly; it was something positive but private, because social norms required that it be kept hidden.

The correspondence between Frieda and Bud clearly indicates that they were aware of the public disapproval of relationships between women. The women they discussed, while having in many ways the kind of middle-class relationships typical of the romantic friendship era, encountered a public condemnation of their partnerships that would not have occurred a century earlier. A new discourse about the unnaturalness of same-sex relationships is clearly present. One can also see a reticence on the part of both women regarding social inquiries about such relationships. That Bud acknowledges that it is a difficult subject to chat about and one that she would not herself have brought up in conversation, and that Frieda was bursting to ask about the Misses Lawter and Cook but did not, clearly indicates that they were both aware that this was a delicate matter and one that ought not to be discussed openly. The Fraser-Williams letters show, however, that Bud and Frieda actively looked for women like themselves and were critical of the dominant discourse. As Bud comments, “there seems to be a fair amount of it about.” The “it” is, of course, a shared experience, and this sense should be taken as a form of community even when it did not result in the establishment of permanent social networks.

Middle-class lesbians of the interwar era found colleges, universities, residence halls, and summer camps safer venues for meeting other women like themselves than more public arenas. It was at Queen’s University in Ontario, for example, that Charlotte Whitton formed the same-sex relationships discussed in Chapter Three. Charlotte’s relationships were with women who shared her intellect, her interests, and her politics. The university, and particularly the women’s club of which she was a part, provided her with opportunities to meet and form relationships with other young women. Anne, who regards herself as having been bisexual during her university student years, formed the majority of her relationships, with both women and men, in university settings in the United States.<sup>673</sup> Throughout her studies, Anne formed relationships

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<sup>673</sup> Anne, personal interview, 1 May 1998.

with women and men she met on campus.<sup>674</sup> Although Anne states that she was bisexual at the time, she did not have a consciously-realized bisexual identity.<sup>675</sup> She simply found both women and men attractive and acted on those attractions. Before lesbian-feminism, Anne's community was neither a lesbian nor a bisexual one, but rather was an intellectual and political one within which her relationships occurred.

Women still had to be very discreet about their encounters, but middle-class same-sex institutions did at least provide women with social opportunities apart from men.<sup>676</sup> Yet such institutions, and most particularly the American women's colleges, became explicitly linked in this period with lesbian behaviour. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anti-feminist rhetoric in Europe and the United States often included the charge that higher education masculinized women and could turn them into lesbians. Women's institutions, which coupled higher education with isolation from male company, came under increasing suspicion and had increasingly to police close relationships between women for fear that they might have a lesbian component.<sup>677</sup>

The attitude towards women's colleges changed in response to the new novels about such institutions. Sherrie Inness demonstrates that, despite the 1920s glamour and mystique of "lesbian chic," the 1920s and 1930s saw the extensive publication of novels about lesbianism in college life which portrayed the women's college as "a nest of perversity." Inness argues that the novels had a considerable influence on how the public regarded single-sex education and

<sup>674</sup> Some of those relationships are discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>675</sup> Anne, personal interview, 1 May 1998.

<sup>676</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 107-108.

<sup>677</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 229, 235; Sherrie A. Inness, *The Lesbian Menace*, 35.

marked women's institutions as abnormal and as breeding-grounds for Sapphism.<sup>678</sup> Despite the backlash against women's colleges, however, increasing numbers of women sought higher education; some of them were lesbians.

Although upper middle-class women's lives were circumscribed by gender norms and by notions of respectability, their social position afforded them the protection of privilege. They had greater economic backing, in many cases, on which they could rely. It can also be suggested that class biases about sexuality worked in the favour of middle-class women, as even in the twentieth century they were assumed to be less sexual than working-class women. Even though a very sexualized discourse of same-sex relationships was emerging, middle-class women remained somewhat protected from it before the Second World War partly because of societal assumptions about their degree of physical sexuality; it was less conceivable that middle-class women would be sexually active with each other than it was that working-class women would.<sup>679</sup>

Analyses of gay and lesbian communities have traditionally focused on small geographical areas in which gays and lesbians could be found in large numbers. While most of these studies examine largely working-class communities, there are a few that discuss wealthier enclaves. Esther Newton, for example, has documented the establishment of a prosperous gay and lesbian community in *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town*.<sup>680</sup> Just outside New York City, Cherry Grove became a haven for gays and lesbians in the years before the Second World War. Cherry Grove grew rapidly between 1945 and 1960 and became a weekend haven where wealthy middle-class gay men and lesbians could

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<sup>678</sup> Sherrie A. Inness, *The Lesbian Menace*, 38-39.

<sup>679</sup> One of the many holdovers from nineteenth-century discourse was the assumption that working-class women were by nature more likely to be promiscuous and that they did not know how to behave demurely. That middle-class girls and women engaged in "bad" behaviour as well was hidden by their families.

<sup>680</sup> Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island*.

retreat from their closeted lives in the city and could live openly in a gay environment. Some of the younger women, especially in the 1950s, were more committed to butch and femme identities than were the older women, attesting to the fact that butch and femme roles were not exclusively the province of working-class lesbians, and also to the fact that the butch-femme relationship model grew increasingly widespread.<sup>681</sup> Middle-class lesbians were able to be more affectionate and more transgressive in their dress and behaviour in Cherry Grove than they were elsewhere. In the outside world, concern for job security and respectability restricted expression of lesbianism. The Cherry Grove community provided a safe haven in which their sexuality was validated and affirmed.

### **The Working-Class Bar Community**

The degree to which lesbian community was divided by class can best be seen in the attitudes towards those women who were the most visible lesbians in the middle of the twentieth century: the butch and femme lesbians of urban bar cultures. Openly sexual, transgressing gender norms, and fighting for public space, these women became the symbol of all that was wrong with lesbians—both to heterosexual society and to middle-class lesbians who did not approve of their openness and of their links to crime and drugs.

This section outlines the bar communities which developed in North America between the 1930s and the 1960s. My purpose here is not to give a detailed account of the Canadian bar culture, for Elise Chenier has used the Lesbians Making History Project interviews to do just that, but rather to offer a context for my narrators' opinions of the bar scene. I shall argue here

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<sup>681</sup> Esther Newton, "The 'Fun Gay Ladies': Lesbians in Cherry Grove, 1936-1960," in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge, 1997), 145-164.

that antipathy towards many aspects of bar culture formed an important part of the narrators' subjectivities.

Lesbian-feminism of the 1970s posited a unified lesbian subject. That lesbian subject was a middle-class one, however, with values and customs originating mainly with the university-educated lesbians who were involved in the homophile movement in the 1950s and 1960s and then in feminism. The rejection of the bar culture and of butch and femme gender roles also took place among lower middle-class lesbians, however, women who did not attend university. In the 1950s and 1960s in particular, it was they who could reasonably have believed that they had more to lose from the public visibility of the bar culture than did university educated women. As working women in "middling" jobs, they were closer to the bar women in status and social circle, and their personal investment in distancing themselves from the bar culture may therefore have been considerable.

Working-class bar communities began to emerge in the interwar period in the United States. By the 1930s, a large number of words for lesbianism existed, which clearly indicates the existence of a lesbian subculture. Faderman describes an extensive lesbian argot which continued the use of a number of terms from the 1920s, including "dyke," "bulldagger," and "gay," and contained new words as well. The 1930s saw the opening of several women-only bars, such as Mona's in San Francisco, which opened in 1936. These bars were predominantly working-class, although middle-class women did sometimes frequent them.<sup>682</sup>

Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis chronicle the emergence of a distinct lesbian bar culture in Buffalo, New York, tracing its origins back at least as far as the 1930s.<sup>683</sup> Their study found that the Buffalo bars were hard to find, were sometimes short-lived,

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<sup>682</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 107-108.

<sup>683</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 31.

and almost always were working-class women's enclaves.<sup>684</sup> Bars were mixed rather than exclusively lesbian, and they were dangerous places. Raids were frequent, particularly in the years immediately before the end of Prohibition.<sup>685</sup> House parties were also an important arena for lesbian socializing, most particularly for Black women who were less inclined to frequent the bars. It was not that they felt that the bars were not welcoming; the Black women interviewed preferred parties because it was easier to dance and "let their hair down."<sup>686</sup> White women also frequented house parties when no bars were available. During the 1940s, the bars grew in importance as a social outlet for lesbians and a distinct subculture began to be associated with them.

In the 1950s and the 1960s, the butch/femme bar culture of the pre-war years grew further. The postwar era in both Canada and the United States was one of overt condemnation and repression of homosexuality, yet the subcultures of gay men and lesbians had grown too large to be stifled by the measures the government and the medical profession were employing. Much of the literature available on lesbians in the postwar period is American and focuses on this largely working-class culture. The two most notable studies, Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* and the Kennedy and Davis book *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, both reveal the growth of a strong and public working-class urban lesbian culture, situated mainly in the bars of the downtown cores of various American cities.

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<sup>684</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 33-36.

<sup>685</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, "I Could Hardly Wait to Get Back to that Bar': Lesbian Bar Culture in Buffalo in the 1930s and 1940s," in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge, 1997), 33.

<sup>686</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, "I Could Hardly Wait to Get Back to that Bar'," 35.

## The Canadian Bar Culture

As in the case of the United States, the most visible world of lesbians in post-war Canada was the predominantly working-class butch and femme bar culture. Apart from the film *Forbidden Love*, in which lesbians who lived in Canada during the 1950s and 1960s discuss their lives in the bar scene and in relationships, there is little documentation of this culture in Canadian society. We know that there were many lesbian-friendly bars in Canadian cities in the 1960s, but fewer social outlets of this kind can be found for the previous decades.<sup>687</sup> Canada's lesbians were to come to the bar scene rather later than their American counterparts. As in America, however, bars were frequented on a regular basis only by a segment of the lesbian community—largely working-class women. Middle-class lesbians either avoided bars altogether, or visited them only occasionally as “tourists.”

Line Chamberland charts the bar scene of Montréal from 1955 to 1975 and shows that the bar culture was structured along the same butch and femme lines as that of the United States. She also argues that butch and femme roles were strategies for securing and defending public space, in which she is in agreement with the Kennedy and Davis argument that butch/femme couples were the precursors to the lesbian-feminist movement of the 1970s in fighting for women's right to live openly and publicly as lesbians.<sup>688</sup> As Chamberland states, “exposure was needed in order to ensure that lesbian bars became known and accessible. Knowing that such places existed and discovering where they were was a problem. On the other hand, concealment was necessary in order to escape repression.”<sup>689</sup>

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<sup>687</sup> Donald W. McLeod, *Lesbian and Gay Liberation in Canada: A Selected Annotated Chronology, 1964-1975* (Toronto: ECW Press/Homewood Books, 1996), 277-286.

<sup>688</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 378-380.

<sup>689</sup> Line Chamberland, “Remembering Lesbian Bars: Montréal, 1955-1975,” 363.

Perhaps the most extensive study of a Canadian butch and femme culture is Elise Chenier's examination of Toronto's public lesbian community from 1955-1965. Chenier interviewed seven women, in addition to examining the Lesbians Making History Project interviews also used in this dissertation. Chenier argues that the lesbian bar culture evolved out of lesbians' desire, in a context of social stigmatization, to socialize with other lesbians. The lives of these working- and street-class women were, Chenier suggests, influenced by the links between the bar culture, prostitution, and the drug trade, and by the presence of the police. Chenier's analysis of the Continental challenges the middle-class bias in Canadian lesbian history, and does so without romanticizing the harsh lives of the women she discusses. The Continental, like many other lesbian haunts, was in an area already associated in the minds of the police and the public with prostitution, drugs, and other illicit activities: Chinatown.

While the largest lesbian communities in Canada in the 1950s and 1960s were those of Montréal and Toronto, Vancouver also had a lesbian subculture. Less is known about that community, however. Several of the women interviewed in *Forbidden Love* reveal that the Vanport Hotel was a lesbian hangout in the 1960s. Like the Continental in Toronto, the Vanport was a dangerous and dirty venue in which mainly working-class butch and femme lesbians socialized.<sup>690</sup> Several other bars and clubs catered to a gay and lesbian clientele in the early 1960s, among them the Abbotsford Hotel, the Castle Hotel Puss 'n Boots Room, Club 752, the Devonshire Hotel, the Georgia Hotel, the Montreal Hotel, and the Vancouver Hotel.<sup>691</sup> While the "heyday" of these bars and clubs occurred in the late 1960s and the 1970s, in all the above cases the venues had catered to gays and lesbians before 1965. Without further oral histories of women and men who frequented the Vancouver scene in the 1950s, we cannot know how early these and other bars and clubs became gay and lesbian spots. Unfortunately, none of the early

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<sup>690</sup> *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Story of Lesbian Lives*, Lynn Fernie & Aerlyn Weissman, dir., National Film Board of Canada, 1992.

<sup>691</sup> Donald W. McLeod, *Lesbian and Gay Liberation in Canada*, 278.

female patrons of these establishments were forthcoming for this study, and thus I am unable to discuss the pre-1965 Vancouver lesbian community in any detail.

The mid-twentieth-century bar culture of the larger Canadian cities provided women with a sense of community in that they knew where they could go to be with women like themselves, and they had a support group of women who trained them in the roles of the community, who saw them through relationships and struggles with the police and employers, and who fought with them for public lesbian space. There was not necessarily a sense of community based on identity shared across class and other lines, however. Jerry argues, in fact, that there was no lesbian community in the 1950s and 1960s. “You survive, you survive,” she comments.<sup>692</sup> Because she was interviewed by Chenier in 1992, by which time notions of lesbian community had a feminist and political slant, it may be suggested that Jerry’s analysis of the 1950s and 1960s community was predicated on later norms requiring a political lesbian-feminist commitment to community organization. Prior to lesbian feminism, women simply came together in groups based on shared sexual attractions.

The bar scene was predominantly butch and femme, as Chenier and others have shown, and was often a rough and dangerous world in which to live. Barb confirms that butches dressed like men, with men’s clothes, brush-cuts, “the whole works.” One butch Barb met lived fully as a man, even holding a male job. Even when slacks became more fashionable for women, the butches would wear a more masculine style, favouring slacks with a fly front.<sup>693</sup> She remembers that the couples were easy to spot, “because it would be like a guy and a girl together, and the girl would be mostly much more feminine.”<sup>694</sup>

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<sup>692</sup> Jerry, LMH, interviewed by Elise Chenier, 23 November 1992.

<sup>693</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

<sup>694</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

Butch-femme roles were an important part of working-class lesbian life in the 1950s and 1960s, and those who were entrenched in the bar scene, especially at the Continental, lived publicly in those roles. Those who were more occasional visitors to the bars flirted with the roles, but often did not hold to them very deeply or take them very seriously. Reva's story has been made famous by the film *Forbidden Love*, but is worth repeating here. Reva did not feel that she was either butch or femme, but rather thought that she was somewhere in the middle. She and her partner, also Reva, made a trip to New York, and to Greenwich Village in particular, to "look for the lesbians." They went to Greenwich Village because the lesbian pulp novels they had been reading identified the Village as a major lesbian area. "You would have laughed if you'd seen us," Reva said:

She was about five-five, I'm only five feet tall, and she was fairly heavy. I was really skinny in those days. She wore a dress. I wore a red blazer, black pants, and a tie...the best butch clothes that I could figure out, what a butch wore. And she had her dress, and off we went to look for the dykes. We walked around Greenwich Village, got nowhere, got a cabbie, said 'we want to go to a gay bar.' He took us to some bar. We went in there and looked around, and couldn't tell "a" from "b". They were very uptight...People looked at us. I guess we looked really weird...and that was it. That was our big foray into New York City and then we never found them.<sup>695</sup>

Even though the two Revas did not rigidly identify with the butch-femme roles, that was the kind of community they were used to seeing in Montréal. They were looking for women who were clearly identifiable as lesbians because of their gender performance: "I mean, we didn't know what we were looking for," Reva said. "We were looking for a very obvious butch-femme scene, where all the butches were looking like butches, and all the femmes were looking like femmes, and you could tell them apart, and they'd be in couples, and we'd recognize the thing! But we didn't find that kind of a scene in New York."<sup>696</sup> When they did not find such women, they were confused.

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<sup>695</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

<sup>696</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

Such a scene was there, however. Pat married a gay man in 1951 in order to get away from her family and live in New York. She remembered the New York scene as “wild.” Pat was only nineteen when she moved to New York, but she had already attended some gay bars in Montréal where, as in Toronto, drinking, prostitution and drugs were a part of bar life. Even so, she was surprised by some of the aspects of the New York scene. Only in New York did she come across lesbian use of dildos, for example. Pat recalls that the butch-femme scene in New York was much more rigid than it was in Montréal. “It was more pronounced in the Village,” she said, “and there was more sex, more pot, and more drinking.”<sup>697</sup>

Travelling to other cities was an important part of lesbian life in the 1950s and 1960s if one could afford it. Pam went to Montréal occasionally, but made many trips to Buffalo bars. She also went to Detroit, where being butch or femme was a requirement for entry into some of the bars. “If you were a butch, and you didn’t have a tie or a jacket, you were actually asked to leave,” she remembered, “because that’s the way the bar worked.”<sup>698</sup> Like Pat, Pam suggests that gender roles were more strongly defined in the United States. Pam remembers one particularly tough Detroit bar called Knit One, Pearl Two, in which the female bartender was bald. Pam could hardly tell “if it was male or female.”

The butch-femme scene in the United States was more visual to Pam than the Canadian scene, and

where we were more social, if we did have a party or something, we could go and dance with each other, or somebody else’s girlfriend. It wasn’t that you were, you know, putting the make on them. You just were, it was dancing. In Detroit, when we’d go to house parties there or to the bars, God forbid if you went over and asked somebody else’s girlfriend to dance without asking this person’s, butch, permission to have the dance.<sup>699</sup>

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<sup>697</sup> Pat, personal interview, 24 September 1998.

<sup>698</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998.

<sup>699</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998.

Pam's perspective on this issue is rather different from that of many of the narrators in the Lesbians Making History Project interviews, who recall that the Continental was much the same; it was very unwise to ask a woman to dance unless one had the prior permission of her partner. This was particularly the case when asking a femme woman to dance, as the butches were extremely possessive. It may be noted that Pam was speaking of the Canadian house parties, many of which she organized, rather than of the bar culture in Canada per se. It may well have been the case that the women who attended Pam's house parties were not as possessive and as rigid about gender than were those who attended American house parties and bars.

It is difficult to reconcile the testimonies given on the subject of the Canadian bar scene. All the narrators who visited the bars in Montréal and Toronto attest to the fact that the butch-femme relationship was the predominant mode of relationship among regular bar patrons. Pat, Mary and Pam argue that the American bar scene was even more rigid in terms of its employment of butch and femme roles. Why, then, was Reva unable to find the sort of community in New York that she was used to seeing in Montréal? It may simply have been an unfortunate coincidence that the bars the two Revas visited in New York were not those of the working-class butch/femme couples. It may also have been that they had dressed in a moderate butch/femme style but in clothes not typical of that bar scene, and that the taxi driver may have taken them to a bar frequented by less openly lesbian patrons.

That the differences between Canada and the United States can be attributed to cultural differences is unlikely. Too many of the cultural norms of the butch-femme bar scene were similar, and there was considerable American influence on Canadian lesbians, especially Central Canadians, because of the frequent visits Canadian lesbians made to the United States. Rather, it is likely that the greater entrenchment in the American communities of butch-femme norms of behaviour was due to the earlier development of the subculture in the United States. Those works that discuss the bar scene in the US usually identify the 1930s, if not the 1920s, as the

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starting-point for the butch-femme bar scene. In Canada, that same culture does not seem to have appeared until the late 1940s. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the additional ten to twenty years of butch-femme culture in America resulted in greater cohesion and definition of sub-cultural norms. Had the butch-femme culture in Canada developed for a further twenty years, instead of being virtually wiped out after the advent of second-wave feminism, it might also have become more rigid and uniform than it was.

The Canadian urban scene was also a little late in developing compared to that in London, England. In the late 1950s, Pat and Mary quit their jobs and went to Europe and Britain for several months, spending several weeks working in Chelsea in an area they describe as “bohemian.” They attended a gay club later featured in the lesbian film *The Killing of Sister George*. Through a lesbian couple they already knew, they met many British gays and lesbians and went to many house parties. Pat commented, “I found, actually, in those days, I found the British people were more kinky than Canadians, because they were more open and they used to jump from partner to partner...and the straight couples would come to the gay bars and sort of be curious about women...so there was a lot of kinkiness in London.” Mary responded, “We loved it. It was so, kind of free.”<sup>700</sup> Louise also found the English scene to be very open in the years before she immigrated to Canada in 1951. After leaving home, she had worked in a bar in Soho and had grown fond of the wide variety of customers, among whom could be found lesbians, gay men, prostitutes and johns, and anyone seeking the many entertainments available in the district. From the perspective of Louise, Mary and Pat, Canada lacked the sort of sexual freedom and experimentation typical of some parts of England in the same period.<sup>701</sup>

The Canadian bar culture may have been a little tame compared to the American and British scenes in the same era, but it was “wild” enough to be the subject of much public

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<sup>700</sup> Mary & Pat, joint personal interview, 26 September 1998.

<sup>701</sup> Paris and Berlin were, of course, also important cultural centres for lesbians and gay men.

condemnation, the target of police raids, and the focus of criticism from an emerging homophile movement desperate to persuade North Americans that gay men and lesbians were normal, productive individuals whose lifestyle was not abhorrent. It was also subject to criticism from lower middle-class lesbians who were sufficiently involved in the urban milieu to know about the bars but largely unwilling to be involved in the bar culture.

**“Not the upper crust, but the medium sort of thing”: ‘respectable’ lesbians, house parties, and bars**

In 1958, a fight broke out between Doris and Pat, two Toronto lesbians. “Doris used to be so jealous of us...She never liked Pat...I think that Doris wanted Esther [Doris’ partner at that time], but she wanted me too,” said Mary, Pat’s partner. “Next thing I know, she’s choking her. She was actually choking Pat, and you know, you don’t see that today, women fighting, but you used to in those days.” At this point in the conversation, Pat revealed that Doris had been whispering in her ear while she was choking her, “‘I’m going to kill you.’”<sup>702</sup>

Had this fight taken place outside one of Toronto’s downtown lesbian bars, such as the Continental, it might not have been worthy of much mention. Such fights were common in and outside lesbian bars in the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>703</sup> But this fight took place in the suburbs of Toronto, outside a lesbian house party in a quiet neighbourhood. The lesbians attending this and other house parties avoided the bar scene precisely because of the violence associated with it, and because of the risk public exposure held for their jobs and their class respectability. They saw themselves as different from bar women, and yet here were two of them duking it out on the lawn.

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<sup>702</sup> Mary & Pat, joint personal interview, 26 September 1998.

<sup>703</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 67-112; *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Story of Lesbian Lives*.

For many lesbian women in the years before feminism, community was hard to find and difficult to maintain. Lesbians found community wherever they could, but only some lived openly in the public communities about which lurid articles and novels were written. Lesbian historiography, which focused initially on upper middle-class educated lesbians, has more recently discussed the highly visible working-class lesbians of the bar culture. Largely missing from lesbian historiography, however, are those women who arguably were the majority of lesbians before 1965: women who were neither wealthy and highly educated, nor poor and involved in the public bar communities of major Canadian cities. They were store clerks, nurses, schoolteachers and office workers. In suburbs, in isolated couples, and in small groups of friends, they lived behind the walls of respectability. They lived their lesbianism in secrecy, not willing to engage in behaviours they regarded as “rough” and which would likely have cost them their jobs. Perhaps because they lived their lives largely unnoticed at the time and were neither highly visible nor politically active, they have been neglected by historians. Here I seek to redress this imbalance, and to understand the ways in which sexuality and class were intimately linked in their construction of lesbian identity.

Most works on the Canadian bar culture of the 1950s and 1960s focus primarily on those women who lived fully in the bar life. Elise Chenier interviewed a few “uptowners” who visited the bars only infrequently or on weekends, but her emphasis is on the “downtowners,” or women who lived “the gay life” full-time in the bar scene. Chenier acknowledges the difficulty for all lesbians of living a lesbian life in a hostile world, but she suggests that social and economic class created a distance between uptowners and downtowners that their shared sexual orientation could not bridge.<sup>704</sup> Line Chamberland’s research on the Montreal bars also suggests that class

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<sup>704</sup> Elise Chenier, “Tough Ladies and Troublemakers,” 212-213.

significantly influenced the mode of lesbian socializing in the 1950s and 1960s and that women's experience of homophobia varied according to class position.<sup>705</sup>

One of the few American scholars to explore in depth the social worlds of lower middle-class lesbians is Katie Gilmartin. Gilmartin argues that "the gay bar was a radically different cultural space for middle-class women...and for the predominantly working-class clientele that frequented the bars."<sup>706</sup> In her examination of middle-class lesbians' lives in 1950s and 1960s Colorado, Gilmartin found that middle-class lesbians might occasionally have visited the bars, but they did not identify with bar life. In many cases, they distinguished their own lives from those of the bar women, forming their own lesbian identities in relation to other cultural practices and types of community. The public and outspoken world of bar women was anathema to the interests of middle-class women, and class was an integral part of her narrators' struggles over closetedness and the leading of double lives.<sup>707</sup> Secrecy was similarly crucial for lower middle-class Canadian lesbians. To the narrators in my study, the bar scene was enticing in its openness and its freedom, and yet it was filled with traps of other kinds. My narrators have a grudging respect for the toughness of the bar women, particularly the butches, who had to face the most public condemnation and police harassment, but none of the narrators wanted to be that open about their sexuality themselves.

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<sup>705</sup> Line Chamberland, "Remembering Lesbian Bars: Montreal 1955-1975." in *Gay Studies From the French Cultures: Voices from France, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, and The Netherlands*, eds. Rommel Mendès-Leite and Pierre-Olivier Busscher (New York: The Harrington Park Press, 1993), 231-269.

<sup>706</sup> Katie Gilmartin, "'We Weren't Bar People': Middle-class Lesbian Identities and Cultural Spaces," *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 3 (1996), 1.

<sup>707</sup> Gilmartin's article is based on some of the research done for her PhD dissertation, "'The very house of difference': Intersections of Identities in the Life Histories of Colorado Lesbians, 1940-1965" (Yale University, 1995).

The narrators constructed their narratives of lesbian socializing around antipathy to many aspects of bar culture. They distanced themselves from its more violent and “seedy” aspects, even while often acknowledging an occasional interest in visiting bar life. The narrators formed their initial sense of themselves in an environment hostile to lesbianism and to transgressive gender performance generally. They were also attempting to make careers for themselves in respectable but not necessarily secure and high-status jobs.

To these women, social class and respectability were as important as their lesbianism, which from their perspective made interaction with the bar community problematic and dangerous. Class concerns both limited their ability to explore lesbian community in the 1950s and 1960s and informed the ways in which they developed and responded to community. Their subjectivities—their views of themselves in relation to the world in which they lived—were constructed along class lines as well as lines of gender and sexuality. They were lesbians, certainly, and they socialized on that basis, knew consciously that they were different to the rest of society, and rebelled against heteronormativity to the extent that they were unwilling to live unhappy lives as married women. But they were also women who, whatever their class origins, had achieved middle-class status, respectability, and income, and these attributes informed their self-perceptions and limited the degree to which they were willing to live openly as lesbians.

One cannot really speak of class conflict among lesbians in Canada before the 1950s. Until the postwar era and the growth of the visible bar culture, lesbians of different classes were so far removed from one another and from public view that class differences existed but were not the source of friction between groups of lesbians. It is with the rise of the bar culture that one sees conflict emerging between working-class and middle-class lesbians. The increasing public attention to the subject of homosexuality and the negative portrayals of the bar women as the antithesis of ideal womanhood gave rise to a desire among some lesbians to distance themselves from this new visible culture and to think of themselves, and eventually to publicly portray themselves, as more respectable. Condemnation of the bar culture became common

among lesbians from the middle class. The narrators for this study, all of whom could be defined as lower middle-class in the period under study, sought to distinguish their lives and behaviour, then and now, from those of the bar women. The language they use to describe the bars is often pejorative, particularly when compared with their celebratory tone regarding the house parties that were their primary form of community socializing.

Three negative attributes of the bar scene are repeatedly identified by the narrators: the general seediness of the bars, the frequent fights between women, and the risk of being seen by a work colleague or arrested during a police raid. Many of the women interviewed for this study confirm that the bars were dirty, violent and dangerous places in which to socialize. Barb, Pat, and Mary recalled that many of the bar regulars took and dealt drugs, were prostitutes or pimps, and were very poor. “The dredges of society used to hang around there,” Pat remarked. “You’d go in there, and you gotta wash your hands when you got out.”<sup>708</sup>

Fights were frequent in lesbian bars, and several narrators remembered witnessing fights. Barb managed to avoid the fights at the Continental, but was aware that they happened. Lois remembers the fights at the Continental. “I used to get in one or two,” she said.<sup>709</sup> Reva also remembers hearing about fights, although she was lucky enough not to witness any during her few visits to the bars in Montreal.<sup>710</sup> Personal experience of domestic abuse seemed to temper some women’s responses to the fighting. Pam attended various bars and clubs before 1965 and witnessed several fights. When asked if she ever participated in the fights herself, she replied “I did enough fighting with the girl I lived with.”<sup>711</sup> Cheryl reports that, after she and her friends

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<sup>708</sup> Pat, personal interview, 24 September 1998.

<sup>709</sup> Lois, personal interview, 3 October 1998.

<sup>710</sup> Reva, personal interview, 5 August 1997.

<sup>711</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998.

left the air force and moved to Toronto, they started frequenting the Continental and the Music Room. Cheryl found the Continental women

so tough. Oh my God! You know...I guess we were just so innocent. We just couldn't believe, I mean you'd go in there and you'd sit with your back to the wall...lots of fights...always bothered me why people needed to fight. Breaking beer bottles, smacking them up and then holding them up to one another's...And I guess it was because...I had experienced the physical abuse at the hands of a woman that, you know, I thought, 'why does this have to happen?'<sup>712</sup>

The main reason that lower middle-class women chose to avoid the bars, however, was the risk of being seen by a colleague from work or being picked up by the police during a raid, and losing one's job. Those bars that allowed an openly lesbian clientele usually reserved a back room for them, and lesbians could theoretically socialize in privacy. Heterosexual people did, however, enter the bars to look at them.<sup>713</sup> Many women worried that these heterosexual "tourists" might include people they knew from their outside lives. Had colleagues from work seen them in such a venue, their jobs might well have been in jeopardy.

Pat remembers well the societal attitudes towards gay people. "You didn't go out of your way to announce that you were gay," she said, and commented that

You had to be careful, because the cops...they'd go out of their way to be nasty to you...so you didn't give them any chance to name-call...so you'd have to be cool in the clubs and walking along the streets. You would never think of walking hand-in-hand. I mean, it just wasn't done. And you didn't dress as butchy as you would if you were going to a house party or something.<sup>714</sup>

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<sup>712</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

<sup>713</sup> A narrator in *Forbidden Love* remembers an occasion on which the women at her table, who were being stared at by a group of heterosexual "tourists", made a sign that said "Please Do Not Feed the Animals" and put it on the edge of their table.

<sup>714</sup> Pat, personal interview, 24 September 1998.

At a house party, women were much less likely to be harassed by the police or by heterosexual people, so they could dress in a more “butchy” way without fear of it causing them to be the target of abuse. In the bars, the threat of a police raid was always present.<sup>715</sup>

As a police officer herself, Billie was well familiar with the bar scene in Toronto in the early 1960s. She did not go to house parties until she had been on the force for a year, and was closeted in her lesbianism. Her only experiences of the Continental were of occasions on which she was part of police raids. She reports that undercover policewomen were used in the Continental, but that she was never required to work undercover. “I’d have got caught,” she says. Her police work meant that socializing at the Continental was out of the question: “To go to the Continental was like an excursion into the twilight zone...some of the women there we had arrested, so it was impossible.”<sup>716</sup> It was not until the early 1970s that Billie would frequent the gay bars socially, and even then it was difficult. The bar women knew by then that she was a police officer and would tell her when the police came in, so that she could hide. On one occasion, however, she was seen by a fellow police officer and was warned that she could lose her job.

One should not assume that those lesbians who generally avoided the bar scene were immune to the consequences the regular patrons suffered. Even those women who were only occasional visitors to the bars, such as Barb, could sometimes reap the same consequences as the regulars. Barb remembers leaving the St Charles one evening with two friends:

I was walking ahead of them, actually, and the other two were sort of arm-in-arm and they were singing going up the street...and next thing I know, I was walking just ahead of them and looking in a store window, and I got this on the side of my arm, this squeeze, and ‘come on, you’re coming with me.’ I turned around quickly, and there he was - a plainclothes man [who] said, ‘you’re disturbing the peace. I’m arresting you.’ I said ‘Who are you?’ and he said ‘I’m

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<sup>715</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

<sup>716</sup> Billie, personal interview, 23 September 1998.

police.’ So I asked to see and he showed me his badge and in the meantime, there was two of them and they were sitting in a car opposite the bar, St. Charles, and they watched us come out. There’s no doubt about it.<sup>717</sup>

One of the women got away through an alley, but Barb and one friend were taken into custody for the night. The next morning, they went to court and pleaded guilty and had to pay a fine. It was much less risky to plead guilty and get the matter resolved than to plead not guilty and spend more time in court, thus risking exposure.

A social life based around bars did not necessarily need to involve the less reputable venues. There were more “upscale” establishments for those who could afford them. In these establishments, a good standard of dress and behaviour was required, and often women were not allowed entrance unless they were in the company of a man. These were not gay or lesbian bars as such, but rather establishments that at least tolerated a gay or lesbian presence. Billie does not remember it being illegal for women to enter bars together, but it was the case that some of the bars were restricted to “women and escorts” so that prostitutes could be kept out. Lesbians found their access to bars restricted by this custom, but by and large it was men grouping together who were policed more forcefully than women. A gay man often had to have a woman with him to get into an establishment.<sup>718</sup> Testimonies in *Forbidden Love* confirm that gay men and lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s often worked together to circumvent such restrictions: they would enter together, and then go their separate ways. “What they would do in the men’s washroom,” one narrator stated, “was none of your business.”<sup>719</sup> For those lesbians keen to visit bars but also wishing to maintain a respectable image, such cooperation was vital.

Pam recalls double-dating with gay men on many occasions in the 1950s and 1960s so that she and her partner could gain access to various establishments. The practice was also

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<sup>717</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

<sup>718</sup> Billie, personal interview, 23 September 1998.

<sup>719</sup> *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Story of Lesbian Lives*.

important for work purposes: “Through to the point that one chap, [he] and I had to stop going to his work especially, because everybody thought we were such a wonderful couple that, you know, why weren’t we getting married...so we had to have a fight and break up because of it.” She dated gay men in order to go to dances. “It was a good arrangement,” she commented. Lesbians and gay men in middle-class jobs needed to maintain an image of heterosexual respectability. In this respect at least, the two communities were mutually supportive. Barb reports that many of the women went to mixed parties with gay men. “I can remember at one place somebody came to the door for something and the guys all grabbed a woman, so that they’d be standing like this next to each other.”<sup>720</sup> If men in particular were found assembled in a same-sex gathering, they could be arrested, so mixed parties were organized.

Class, safety and respectability were interrelated factors in lesbian socializing in the 1950s and 1960s, and the development of lesbian house parties provided a respectable alternative to the bar scene. The house parties are described by the narrators in much more flattering terminology than the bars. Not only do their testimonies reveal a feeling of greater safety, but there is also much less condemnation of the activities of the women who frequented the parties. Barb comments: “I think some of the women that I met were women that didn’t want to be downtown, you know? A little nervous because they knew about these bars, the people in the city knew about Letros downstairs, and so that was another thing they were nervous about being around, in case of, you know, being picked up...”<sup>721</sup> Most of the women Barb met at house parties “had the better jobs. We weren’t the ritzy people in town, but we all had jobs. There wasn’t anyone unemployed at the time, and we all had responsible jobs, you know?...Not the upper crust, but the medium sort of thing...Good jobs.”<sup>722</sup>

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<sup>720</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

<sup>721</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

<sup>722</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

Implicit in Barb's comment is a negative judgement of the bar women, many of whom were unemployed, were in low-status jobs, or were prostitutes. It is clear that Barb's subjectivity as a lesbian was affected by class considerations. There is no unified lesbian subject here, but rather *types* of lesbian, some of them respectable, and others not. Barb implies at least three groupings of lesbians: the unemployed, the "medium sort," and the "upper crust." These are class-based groupings, and while Barb makes clear that she and her friends were not of the upper crust, she also makes clear that none of them belonged to the unemployed category. Barb has situated herself and her friends in the middle class, forming a subjectivity which links her sexual orientation with that class status.

Barb revealed that there would be house parties every weekend, and "every weekend there'd be another couple that...would come in."<sup>723</sup> The parties were large and well organized. The women still had to be careful, however:

For the first while, I think, it was, 'drive your car, get a ride, but you better park around the corner, because people across the street, you know, they'll see all these cars and all these women going in and out, with just women, no men. Women going in and out of this house. So try to be a little bit careful...All the time undercover, hiding, you know?...But there was something kind of secret about it, something that really was kind of fun.<sup>724</sup>

Pam was a major player in the house party scene in Toronto in the late 1950s and the 1960s. She and her partner Mickie got to know a number of lesbians through baseball and other contacts. After a ball game they would take twenty or thirty women back to their two-room apartment. "There was everybody who was anybody," Pam says:

I never knew that the parties were important. Because people used to say 'oh, you got an invitation to their party?' I never realized, and I'm sure Mickie went to her grave never knowing these parties were important to some of the gals that

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<sup>723</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

<sup>724</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

we met over the years. And just to be invited to these parties, because there was always somebody going to be there that somebody wanted to meet.<sup>725</sup>

The parties held by Pam and Mickie were significant social events, and Pam's description of the function of the parties is redolent of the sort of language used in previous decades to describe a *soirée*, clearly placing them at a distance from, and out of the reach of, the bar lesbians. Yet these were parties like any other; the women spent their time drinking, dancing, talking, playing games, and otherwise relaxing. Lesbian socializing was not substantially different from heterosexual socializing in this respect. It was merely that the lesbian house parties, unlike their heterosexual equivalents, were held secretly and the women who attended had to be rather more careful about being seen.

Pam confirms that the house party crowd was very different to the bar crowd. "All the girls we knew were in nice positions," she commented,

and we certainly weren't associated with [the Continental]. Not that we weren't curious, and wanted to go, which I did. It was a very frightening time, but there were a group of us decided one time we'd go down. But we would not go down there as we were gay. We were going to go down there thinking that we were straight and just happen to fall into this bar by accident. And we went to go in, and some bouncer at the door says 'well, I suppose you'll want to go into the back, because that's where your crowd is.' 'Our crowd? Excuse me?'"<sup>726</sup>

Pam's sense of self, like Barb's, linked sexual orientation with class, and particularly with class-based behaviours. For Pam, as for other women in this study, the Continental and other bars and clubs might be visited occasionally, but they were not what being gay was all about. Most of the narrators viewed the bar scene as the regrettable side of lesbian life. In identifying the dirtiness of the bars, the violence, and the drinking as the salient features of bar life, and by linking those themes with such words as "rough," "scruffy," and "dredges of society," the narrators sought to distance themselves from bar culture. By contrasting those images with self-portrayals as people

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<sup>725</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998.

<sup>726</sup> Pam, personal interview, 30 September 1998.

who were not “ritzy” but were in “good” jobs, these women placed themselves firmly above the bar women in social status and behaviour.

It was not the case that the less desirable aspects of bar life never intruded on the house parties, however. There was sometimes excessive drinking, occasional drug use, and even fighting. Barb reports,

In the group that I was in, I don't think there was ever...anything that happened. There was once somebody, I think from drinking too much...somebody wasn't supposed to be there with somebody else at the party, and the other one walked in and grabbed her by the head or the hair. I can remember her grabbing her by the hair and pulling her halfway down the steps at this house...Nothing serious happened.<sup>727</sup>

Such things were, however, unusual. All of the narrators stated categorically that, unlike the downtown bar women, the women at the house parties were not involved in heavy drugs. They did drink, and there was domestic violence in some relationships, but the fighting common in the bars did not often find its way to the suburbs, and rarely took place outside people's homes.

The narrators identified the bar scene as dangerous, violent, and seedy, and, while those attributes gave the bars a certain risqué thrill, it was not a way of life that these women chose to remain in. Their perspective is thus very different from that of the women whose social world centred around the bars and for whom bar life provided a positive experience of community. The bar scene was, for working-class lesbians, limiting and liberating, dangerous and simultaneously self-defining. To middle-class lesbians, the bar scene was definitely defining—but in what they regarded as a most unfortunate way.

For the narrators for this study, the limited appeal of the bar scene was overshadowed by its threat to respectability, and particularly to job security. Each of these women who found the public lesbian community in the 1950s and 1960s, regardless of their own class origins, had or sought long-term, well-paid, and respectable employment. Each regarded hard work and

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<sup>727</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

respectability as important, even if, in their youth, they had had a period of less restricted living. Most of them held dear the “ideal” values of hard work and fidelity. Most did not drink to excess, and nor did they take drugs. The bar represented those aspects of lesbian life that were a little on the edge, which might have the occasional appeal as an adventure but were not regarded with any seriousness as a legitimate way of life. For these women, the relative privacy, respectability, and suburban nature of the house parties made them a preferred social outlet. One could attend house parties without risk of arrest, usually without risk of violence, and almost always without risk of threat to employment. Relationships could be pursued and women could socialize with other lesbians, but without the concomitant fear of discovery that was associated with bar life.

Historians have argued that the butch-femme culture of the bar scene was the first lesbian community that fought for public space and defended the rights of lesbian women to associate freely with each other and to have sexual lives. It has been shown that 1970s lesbian-feminism would have had a much more difficult path to follow without the bar culture it so soundly condemned. The bar culture had already established lesbian community in urban areas and had provided at least one generation of women with the knowledge that there were many others like themselves in Canada. By giving many lesbian women a social world into which they could fit, and within which they could express their desires for other women, lesbian bars of the 1950s and 1960s laid the groundwork for the later community that would demand the right to walk openly on the street and to exist without harassment.

I agree with this analysis, but I would further suggest that the bars were almost as integral to the sense of community and the subjectivities of those middle- and working-class lesbians who *did not* frequent them as they were to those women who relied on them as their only social outlet. The bar door marked the threshold between two lesbian worlds: the respectable and the unrespectable. It quite literally marked the entry to the first public lesbian community, but it also was a symbolic marker of class difference within the lesbian community as a whole. In a

way similar to the narratives of heterosexual sexual danger that placed clear boundaries on women's freedom of movement and expression, and defined the consequences for transgression of those boundaries, the bar represented, to the "respectable" lesbian, the risks involved in very public expressions of lesbian sexuality. The boundary between lower middle-class lesbians and the butch and femme women of the bars was crucial to their understanding of who they were as lesbians. It was less the case that they defined themselves as being a particular kind of lesbian—other than a "middling" sort—and more that they defined themselves by default—by who it was that they were not. They were *not* like the bar women.

### **Bisexual Women and the Lesbian Community**

The communities discussed above may well have housed, knowingly or unknowingly, a number of bisexual women. There were no bisexual communities as such. It is in the early part of the twentieth century that one begins to see the emergence of publicly-acknowledged bisexual activity. It would be inaccurate to portray this as bisexual community, however, given that many of those behaving bisexually seemed to express a general rejection of sexual constraints, rather than a bisexual identity per se. Bisexual identity in the modern sense, as a politically and erotically defined sexual orientation alongside, rather than within or between, gay or lesbian identity, is a recent phenomenon. Few before the 1970s argued for bisexuality as an independent sexual orientation, which makes analysis of bisexual history and community extremely difficult.

Scholarship in the history of sexuality has tended to interpret bisexual women's lives in terms of lesbianism, that is to say as part of lesbian history rather than as a history unto itself. For example, Lillian Faderman, in a section of *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* entitled "The Roots of Bisexual Experimentation," discusses the increasing numbers of women who "were giving themselves permission to explore sex between women." She examines, among other things, the work of the 1920s sociologist Katharine Bement Davis, who surveyed over two

thousand married and single women about their erotic experiences and found that fifty percent of the women she interviewed had admitted intense emotional relationships with women, over half of them sexual in nature.<sup>728</sup> Little evidence remains which reveals to the modern reader the motives for Davis' research. She sought to understand all facets of female sexuality, a fascination arising perhaps from her increasing knowledge of sexual diversity, gleaned from her years of experience as a settlement-house worker in Philadelphia.<sup>729</sup> Whatever her motives for undertaking the study, Davis' research is one of the earliest examples of a large study of female sexual habits and is particularly revealing of the variety of female sexual expression in the early twentieth century.

Faderman suggests that the willingness of the many women Davis studied to engage in sexual relationships with women may have occurred because the mood of the times seemed to permit experimentation. In the 1930s, she argues, the new economic climate and the emphasis on conformity negated the gains of the 1920s, and a "'bisexual' compromise was the best [women] could manage."<sup>730</sup> In Faderman's view, material circumstances militated against women's opportunities to discover a lesbian identity and to live openly as lesbians. What Faderman has not taken into account, however, is that some of those women might actually have been bisexual, in terms of long-held desires for both sexes or even a consciously-realized identity. It is likely that in the 1920s, when some women were self-consciously "lesbian" and some women were simply experimenting sexually, others were actually bisexual; it is also likely that, in the 1930s, some of the married women Faderman describes as lesbians who adopted a "'bisexual' compromise" *were actually bisexual*.

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<sup>728</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 63.

<sup>729</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 171-172.

<sup>730</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 99.

Because it is difficult to speak in terms of early twentieth-century bisexual community or identity, one must discuss instead those individual women whose desires and/or actions were bisexual and who formed relationships on that basis. Community for bisexuals before 1965 may therefore have to be thought of in terms of links with the lesbian community on the basis of shared sexual attraction to women. Such an analysis risks subsuming bisexual women once again *within* lesbian history, however, and so must be approached with caution.

Several of the narrators for this study report that they were in relationships with men before they were with women or, in some cases, that they were in relationships with both sexes before beginning to live only as lesbians. Anne had a lengthy period of relationships with both men and women before she finally began seeing only women. She regards herself as having been bisexual, but the term itself was not one that she would have used at the time. She acted on her desires, although she regards her sexual relationships with men always to have been problematic, given that she had to be drunk to have intercourse with them. Yet Anne was not seeing men because she was internally homophobic or because of heteronormativity; she had the relationships with men for much the same reasons as she did those with women—an intellectual and/or a political rapport.

It is difficult to determine the degree to which Anne's experience of sexual desire, situated more in relation to shared intellectual and political beliefs than to any particular identity, was common in North American culture. Certainly, many North American female intellectuals, radical in their politics but also in their lifestyles, “challenged the sexual conventions that uphold male dominance, and experimented with radical new ways of thinking and living.”<sup>731</sup> In the early twentieth century, when many in North American culture were beginning to form the subcultures which would ultimately be the gay and lesbian communities, others incorporated

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<sup>731</sup> Judith Schwarz, Kathy Peiss, and Christina Simmons, “‘We Were a Little Band of Willful Women’: The Heterodoxy Club of Greenwich Village,” in *Passion & Power: Sexuality in History*, eds. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, with Robert A. Padgug (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 120.

new sexual practices into radical lifestyles based on political belief. As John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman suggest, “involvement in radical causes, whether as socialists, anarchists, or feminists, imparted a fervor to their erotic experimentation which they defined as an essential, innovative component of revolutionary struggle.”<sup>732</sup> In Britain too, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there had long been links between radical political thought, especially socialism, and “a fundamental transformation in all relationships, including sexual ones....”<sup>733</sup>

Anne did not articulate her attractions in terms of a conscious revolution in sexual practice as part of broader political philosophy, however. She merely suggested that it was on the basis of shared political and intellectual links that she found people of either sex attractive. Nevertheless, it may be said that, in her early sexual life, Anne's experience fit within radical political expressions of sexuality in that she chose not to obey dominant conventions of sexual morality and instead explored her desires when and with whom they occurred. Her political beliefs, which ran well against the tide of mainstream opinion, may have aided her in being able to recognize her same-sex attractions as well as her opposite-sex ones, and to act sexually with women and also outside the bounds of marriage with men, both of which were unacceptable behaviours in American society at the time.

Because Anne's identity in the period before 1965 cannot clearly be categorized as lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual, and because she defines herself as lesbian but argues that she was bisexual in behaviour during her college days, her experience suggests strongly that the historian must be careful when attempting to apply to past events identity labels which may have

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<sup>732</sup> John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 229. It should be noted that sexual experimentation was more often heterosexual exploration before and outside of marriage rather than bisexual, lesbian or gay, and that the degree of sexual freedom in the early twentieth century varied by gender as well as by class. For an examination of the effects for women of “modern love” see Ellen Kay Trimberger, “Feminism, Men, and Modern Love: Greenwich Village, 1900-1925,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 131-152.

<sup>733</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex Politics and Society*, 175.

little to do with the ways in which our historical subjects saw and would describe their own behaviour. While the labels “lesbian” and “bisexual” can be applied to behaviour, as Anne does about her own, it is clearly inadequate to suggest that either label accurately describes a consciously-realized identity. Rather, Anne's sexual experience before second-wave feminism should be understood as an expression of shared political and ethical commitment. Her relationship to community was therefore not based on sexual orientation.

It is clear from scholarship on lesbian communities and from the tone of remarks made by the narrators for this study that bisexual women were regarded with considerable suspicion by the lesbian community, as they were indeed by the heterosexual community. Whereas heterosexuals suspected any woman involved in a relationship with another woman of being a lesbian, lesbians suspected bisexual women of being heterosexuals who were experimenting for a bit of fun. They were therefore not regarded as trustworthy. Such a judgement was based partly on a dichotomous view of sexuality, but it could also be related to gender norms. Kennedy and Davis report that some of the women they interviewed regarded butches as the only “true” lesbians, placing the femmes somewhere in the middle between lesbian and heterosexual, and often viewing them as bisexual. Other lesbians regarded any woman who stayed in the scene, butch or femme, as lesbian.

Kennedy and Davis attempt to avoid making judgements about who was and who was not lesbian by describing their narrators instead in terms of persistence and fluidity of membership in lesbian community.<sup>734</sup> Such a strategy still does not adequately acknowledge bisexuality, and especially a bisexual community, separate from the lesbian community, but it does at least demonstrate that the lesbian community “housed” many different forms of sexuality. Their narrators, however, were not usually as flexible in their view of the community as were Kennedy

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<sup>734</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 386.

and Davis. Clear judgements were made by many narrators about which women were lesbians and which were not.

Canadian lesbians also made judgements about membership in the lesbian community, and they also differentiated “true” lesbians from those who “moved back and forth” or left the community to get married. The word “bisexual” was used by several of my narrators in a pejorative sense, usually when they were describing an ex-lover who eventually left the community to get married. Pat said “I think she was really bisexual” when she was describing the traumatic breakup of a relationship and her ex-partner’s departure to the United States.<sup>735</sup> The phrase was inserted in a set of comments about the woman being a manipulative, destructive gold-digger. Pat further remembered that many of the exotic dancers in Montréal would “swing both ways.”<sup>736</sup>

When asked if they knew women who were bisexual, almost all the narrators replied that they did not. It is likely, however, that many of them had met bisexual women in the bar scene or at house parties, but had simply been unaware of the fact at that time. Perhaps because of the hostility towards bisexuality in the lesbian community, women going to the bars or the parties may have chosen to express only their desire for women, and not their desire for men. Many bisexual women, if they began a relationship with a man, would immediately have left the lesbian community, where that relationship would not have been approved of. It is impossible to know, therefore, just how many women there were in Canada before 1965 who were bisexual.

### **The Military and Community**

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<sup>735</sup> Pat, personal interview, 24 September 1998.

<sup>736</sup> Pat, personal interview, 24 September 1998.

As mentioned in Chapter One, one of the most significant events of the twentieth century for lesbians and gay men was the Second World War. Those who “came out” in the 1940s portray the war as a fundamental break with the past, arguing that it was the bringing together of thousands of gay men and, to a lesser extent, lesbians in the military and in war work which propelled them rapidly towards the gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. For lesbians in Canada, wartime employment and the return of women to the armed forces in the 1950s were early milestones in community formation. Those of the narrators for this study who served in the military—Sarah, Barb, Cheryl, and Billie—regard it as an important part of their lives. For Barb, Cheryl, and Billie, military service is also inextricably linked to their subjectivity as lesbians.

Only one of the women interviewed for this study served in the Canadian armed forces during the first incarnation of the women’s divisions during the Second World War. Sarah, who came from a military family, joined the air force in 1942. She had not explored her own sexuality at this point, but was aware of other lesbians in the service. Her barrack building housed forty women, and at one corner of the block “there was a gal who had her hair cut [short], which was a real giveaway in those days, and she had a friend...and we all assumed, but we didn’t ever talk about anything like that, that they were a gay pair. This gal definitely was, anyway...And there may well have been others.”<sup>737</sup>

There were—in all of the women’s services. Alexis Alvey, who served with the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service from 1942 to 1945, left the navy of her own volition, but it would appear that her time in service was not without tensions because of her sexuality. Olson reports that Alvey began her naval career as a Sub-Lieutenant and by May of 1944 was Acting Lieutenant Commander. She was highly regarded by many. By October of 1944, however, her relationship with the naval administration had soured. She was informed by the

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<sup>737</sup> Sarah, personal interview, 5 August 1998.

new director of the women's naval service that she was to be transferred "from her prestigious posting in Halifax, to a clerical position in the photographic division of National Service Headquarters in Ottawa."<sup>738</sup> Later that year, Alvey resigned. Olson argues that the director was pressuring Alvey because her relationship with Grace Brodie, her partner, had become known within the women's service. She bases this argument on a memo from Alvey to the director in which Alvey stated "In view of your knowledge of our personal affairs, you will undoubtedly appreciate the importance of my returning to civilian life at the same time as Lt. Brodie. Anything you can do to expedite our release together would be greatly appreciated."<sup>739</sup> It was because of exactly this sort of pressure that many lesbians chose to remain closeted in the war years, fearful as they were of the consequences of lesbian activity.

In the 1950s, Canadian women were allowed back into the armed forces. The testimonies of several women interviewed for this study confirm that, in the postwar era, the armed services were an important introduction to lesbian community, as they were for American lesbians. It was in the service that many young women who had experienced crushes on, or even had had relationships with, other girls or women, came to realize that there were many more women like themselves in Canada. The military gave lesbians the opportunity to socialize with large groups of women and to form relationships away from the prying eyes of family. The armed forces were not completely safe places for lesbians, however, given that concern about homosexuality resulted in increasing scrutiny of servicewomen.

Barb and Cheryl were both to bear the brunt of that scrutiny and to leave the military hurriedly before they could be given dishonourable discharges. Their military experiences, at once traumatic and exciting, take centre stage in their life narratives. A considerable amount of detail is remembered, and both women express enjoyment of the social aspects of their military

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<sup>738</sup> Nancy Olson, "Assembling A Life," 40-50.

<sup>739</sup> Alexis Alvey to Adelaide Sinclair, 13 September 1944, cited in Nancy Olson, "Assembling A Life," 53.

years and a sense of pride about having been part of the military's persecution of lesbians. It is not that Cheryl and Barb are glad to have been thus persecuted, but rather that their narratives portray them as survivors of that persecution. Their personal triumph was not that they won over the military, for they did not, but rather that the pressure for them to leave did not result in them losing their pride in their lesbianism. If anything, it enhanced it. That this particular part of her life story is very important to Cheryl's subjectivity is further indicated by the fact that it is told in similar detail, and often word-for-word, in another interview conducted in 1997.<sup>740</sup>

Barb joined the air force in 1952. She had not had any relationships with other young women since the schoolfriend she first was with as a teenager, nor did she in the air force until she had passed through her basic training and was on a station. There she met another lesbian woman on the same crew and formed a relationship. On their days off, they would go to nearby towns to spend time together.<sup>741</sup> Their social life also included other lesbian women on the base, with whom Barb and her partner held parties and played ball. She recalls that they would often go out drinking together as a group and did little to hide the fact.

Barb's relationship had been going about a year when one of the five lesbian women she associated with was brought before the authorities and was questioned until she volunteered the names of women she thought were lesbian in the service at the time. The group of young women who socialized together a little too often had been noticed. Barb was brought to the commanding officer, who asked what they had been doing and why they were seen so much together:

And at that time, I had a car, and I put it down to, you know, well I always have lots of girls in the car, and we were going here and going there because I was transportation for them, you know? So I said, 'well they're just jealous, I have a car.'<sup>742</sup>

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<sup>740</sup> Cheryl, interviewed by C. S., 20 January 1997, personal collection of Cheryl.

<sup>741</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998. Barb's relationships are explored more fully in Chapter Four.

<sup>742</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

Barb and her girlfriend were told that they had been seen too much together, in her car, playing ball, and going to the recreation centre. She was asked what her feelings were towards the other woman.

Barb and her partner were sent to a psychiatrist in Toronto, escorted by a female air force police officer. They were taken in separately and then together. The psychiatrist asked them what they were doing, and they denied that anything unusual was happening. He asked many questions about their feelings about each other, and whether or not they had ever slept together or had any physical contact. Barb did not find him threatening, and suspects to this day that the reason that he was so gentle with them was that he was himself gay. He sent them back to the station and reported to their commanding officer that they were not lesbians. Barb had known the possible consequences of telling the truth, and consequently had chosen to hide the relationship. She does not remember hearing anything specific that would have indicated to her the possible consequences of being “found out,” but she does recall that she knew that homosexuality was regarded negatively and that she could be thought of as “queer.” Her silence on the subject of her sexuality reveals that she knew full well the consequences of telling the truth and that she chose to protect herself. It should not necessarily be taken as a sign that she repressed her sexuality or was ashamed of it, but rather that she knew that the best way to be able to continue to live as a lesbian without intervention was to keep her sexuality secret.

The women received notice that they were to be transferred to different stations. Barb’s partner, without her knowledge, went to the medical officer on the station and confessed. She told them that she did not want them to be split up and said that the two of them had lied to the psychiatrist. The medical officer called Barb in. The two women were sent to the psychiatrist a second time. When they saw him together, he said to them “you shouldn’t be afraid...if your feelings are like this.” He told them, “you know, there’s lots of places in the city that you can

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go.”<sup>743</sup> The two women confessed and received their discharge papers. They received honourable discharges because they had left voluntarily.

Barb speculates that the military may have given her an honourable discharge rather than a dishonourable one because they did not know how far they could take the issue of lesbianism, but such a conclusion does not explain the experiences of those women who *were* thrown out. Clearly, the military was prepared to give women dishonourable discharges if they were unwilling to leave the services voluntarily. It was in late 1954, towards the end of Barb’s three years, that she left. She remembers that there had been a major purge of lesbians at all the stations, and she does not think that any of them were ever actually caught in sexual activity. Rather, the purging of lesbians from the forces seemed to occur mainly on the basis of rumour and admission under pressure.<sup>744</sup>

Barb’s experience was not uncommon. She was a young woman from the country who had entered the forces after having had only one major relationship with another young woman. In the rural area in which she lived, there was no lesbian community. When she entered the military, she found many other women like herself and began to socialize with them at ball games and parties. The military provided the sort of mass groupings of women that allowed lesbians to discover each other and form alliances based on their sexual orientation. The difficulty was that, by the 1950s, officers in the military were alerted to the presence of lesbians and were engaged more forcefully in weeding them out than had been the case during the Second World War. Groups of women who socialized together, were known not to associate with men, and in some cases dressed in a less than feminine way, were noticeable on a military base where behaviour was closely observed. The formation of small communities in the military was

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<sup>743</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

<sup>744</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

liberating for many lesbian women, yet it was dangerous. The behaviour of Barb and her friends was sufficiently open to alert the commanding officer of her base to a lesbian presence.

Cheryl had a similar experience. After moving to Ontario in 1956, Cheryl and Robyn lived very much like a young married couple. “But we didn’t know any other women, you know, who were together as a couple. So we didn’t know any lesbians or gay men.”<sup>745</sup> When their relationship disintegrated in 1959, Cheryl decided to join the forces. It was in the air force that Cheryl finally found the community she had been waiting for. Her first posting was at Clinton, Ontario. During her time at the Clinton base, three women were kicked out of the forces because they were suspected of being lesbians.<sup>746</sup> Cheryl remembered,

the female officer...called us all together and vowed to us that if we wanted to be kicked out of the RCAF, then all we had to do was tell them that we were homosexuals. So that sort of put the fear of God into everybody, although, you know, when I joined the air force, I made a vow to myself that if any woman, any woman ever, ever gives me a second look, you know, ‘in that way’ that I would, well, I would probably just give her a piece of my mind!<sup>747</sup>

Her experience with Robyn had soured Cheryl’s perceptions of lesbianism and she resisted her attraction towards women. “So I guess I just wanted to be a normal person,” she said, “because I hadn’t been normal for the last three years.” That the three women were being kicked out because of homosexuality only confirmed her negative view of lesbianism. “I thought ‘see, that’s what happens.’ Yep. And yet, I had this affinity for, you know, I knew these three people who were being kicked out...and I knew that they seemed to be like me, you know, like I was.”<sup>748</sup> Because of physical abuse, Cheryl’s lesbian subjectivity was conflicted during

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<sup>745</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

<sup>746</sup> One of these women subsequently became a friend to Cheryl.

<sup>747</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

<sup>748</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

her first year in the RCAF. Lesbianism had become linked in her mind with negative consequences, and she attempted to set herself apart from the lesbians she knew.

Despite her reservations about lesbianism, Cheryl found that she formed friendships with “the butchier type of airwoman.” She felt that they were all gay, but as long as none of them approached her sexually she did not mind their company. She was not absolutely positive about the women’s sexuality: “I assumed,” she said, “and I assumed correctly.” She “swore off” women for the first year or so in the air force, but she felt that they had something in common. Cheryl did not call herself gay at that time, and nor did she even really know what gay was: “Because of my three years with [Robyn],” she commented, “I thought we were the only ones, and then I found out that there were other people, other women like that.”<sup>749</sup>

During her first year in the air force, Cheryl began dating a man. She met Jimmy around six months into her service. Their relationship was not sexual, however. Cheryl regards herself as having been asexual at this point, and Jimmy was of the opinion that sex should be saved until after marriage, so they did little more than kiss and cuddle. Cheryl’s feelings for women began to surface, however, and eventually it became obvious to her that her relationship with Jimmy would not go further. They were at a restaurant one evening and saw a woman come in and sit down across from them:

She just kept looking over every now and then, you know. We’d sort of exchange glances. But [Jimmy] exchanged glances with her as well. So I don’t know what it was. Maybe she was just looking at us as a nice young couple. Who knows? But when she got up and walked out, and we were sitting by the window, [Jimmy] remarked ‘What a beautiful looking woman. What an attractive woman.’ And I’m sitting there, and I’m thinking the same thing. All of a sudden the light went on. I thought, ‘for God’s sake, I’m fighting this, I’m fighting it and fighting it. And at that point I’ve got several friends who are gay and several lesbian friends...and I didn’t discuss it with them, but I knew that they were. So anyway...it was then that I decided that I needed to do something about it.’<sup>750</sup>

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<sup>749</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

<sup>750</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

After that crucial moment, Cheryl withdrew from her relationship with Jimmy, but she did not immediately begin socializing more frequently with lesbians. It was not until she moved to her new station in Nova Scotia that she began to explore her feelings in greater depth. In Nova Scotia she began socializing with women on the ball team. She had been on the ball team in Ontario too, but the Nova Scotia one was different: it was “about ninety percent lesbian.” Cheryl, a new lesbian friend, her friend’s partner, and other members of the ball team would go down to Halifax and visit Africville, “because one of these women had a girlfriend down there. And that’s where we would go, and we’d sit up and drink all night long....”<sup>751</sup>

The ball team had a place they called “the rendezvous” where they met on a regular basis and entertained the navy and army women who would visit. The rendezvous was an open field with a line of trees in front of it. After the ball games were over, they would head for the rendezvous and would drink and “make out.” Sometimes there would be as many as fifty or sixty lesbians meeting there. Such large numbers of women moving about as a group attracted attention, however, and eventually the air force police followed the women to the rendezvous. Cheryl comments:

They went and they got the RCMP, because they didn’t have jurisdiction outside of the base. So they got the RCMP and we were all of a sudden almost surrounded by RCMP, and it was every woman for themselves. They couldn’t arrest us, because, you know, as soon as somebody screamed that the police are here, any booze or anything, it was gone. So, um, there was nothing that they could do, ‘cause there was nothing that they could prove.<sup>752</sup>

It was shortly after that that Cheryl and six of her friends from the ball team were put under house arrest and were sent to St Hubert, Québec to be interviewed by psychiatrist who was “trying to help us with our sickness.” The air force police had figured out that the women were

<sup>751</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

<sup>752</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

not meeting in secret to talk about their boyfriends, but rather that something else was going on, and “that lots of unnatural things were happening.” In addition, because of a personal dispute, one of the lesbians had “squealed” on the women. She had been in the air force for a long time but was getting nowhere with promotion. For her to advance to corporal status, Cheryl said, “she just needed some Brownie points, I guess, and unfortunately we were it.” The airwoman revealed to the air force police that they were meeting at the rendezvous. She was present that night at the rendezvous and was a known lesbian, and yet when the women were put under house arrest, she was not among them. “She was conspicuous by her absence,” Cheryl comments. They later had it “on good authority” that she named the seven of them as lesbians.<sup>753</sup>

The psychiatrist’s report was inconclusive, and he could not identify any of them as lesbians. Upon their return to the base, the women were informed that they were going to be split up and would never be on the same base as each other again. Cheryl’s new friend and her partner were devastated. They were informed that they would probably never be promoted within the ranks and that they would be sent to the worst stations, “you know, the semi-isolation stations.” Cheryl and her friends knew that, if they remained in the service, they would be inviting intimidation. She remarked,

had we stayed in, we would have been giving them permission to intimidate us, and so we just, five of us decided definitely we were getting out. The other two were younger, they were new in all respects. They were new lesbians, they were new into the air force, new to our station. They thought ‘oh no, we don’t want to do this’ and we, as the older ones...we in no way encouraged them one way or the other. But they decided they would get out, because I think, I think but I don’t know, but I think they had a talk with their superiors, and I think their superiors pretty well told them, you know, ‘you’re marked. You’re marked women.’ So, they ended up getting out with us. So, that was the end of the air force.<sup>754</sup>

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<sup>753</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

<sup>754</sup> Cheryl, personal interview, 4 November 1998.

Cheryl left the air force in August 1962, just after the point when her three years were up. The week before their arrest, she had signed on for a further four years in the hope that she would get a posting in France. Because she left voluntarily, she received an honourable discharge.

It was in 1956 that Billie joined the air force. Billie was dating a man at that time, but when she announced that she was joining up, he broke it off, telling her that “only whores join the armed services....”<sup>755</sup> She did not have a gay experience until just before she left the air force in 1961. Being in the physical education field, she knew many of the lesbians on the base. They would be involved in sports and would be quite open about their interest in Billie. Billie acknowledges that she looked gay, even though she did not identify as such at the time. She had very short hair, almost in a brush-cut, virtually no breasts, and broad shoulders because of her physical education work, and women would approach her because they assumed that she was a lesbian.<sup>756</sup>

Even though Billie was not, at that time, interested in women, she was nevertheless well aware of the lesbian community on the base. In addition to their mutual interest in physical education, the lesbian women would all go off the base as a group every weekend. Everybody in the lower ranks, including Billie’s boyfriends at the time, assumed that this was because they were lesbians. Any large group of women socializing together, especially if they did not fit the stereotypical feminine ideal, were assumed to be lesbian. Billie recalls that, even though the group of women had a reputation, they nevertheless had to try to keep their sexuality secret. At night, the staff had to take turns on what was called “fire picket duty”: “you had to go and check the women who lived in a big dormitory, to see if there was anybody sleeping with them. Other women, presumably. And a lot of my friends, I know, did get what they call a medical release.

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<sup>755</sup> Billie, personal interview, 23 September 1998.

<sup>756</sup> Billie, personal interview, 23 September 1998.

They were offered that.”<sup>757</sup> A medical release enabled a woman to obtain an honourable discharge on unspecified grounds. It saved both the woman herself and the military the embarrassment of a documented dishonourable discharge. Billie reports that she knew of women who were the victims of entrapment: the military authorities, if they suspected that a woman was lesbian, would sometimes get another servicewoman to make a sexual approach to tempt the suspected lesbian into revealing herself.

Given the temporary nature of military life for these women, it might not at first appear that their years in the military were important in terms of community formation. It can be argued, however, that for Cheryl, Barb, and Billie, the military was an entrée to a wider lesbian world than they had previously known. Cheryl and Barb had each had but a single same-sex relationship before joining the military, and knew nothing of the large numbers of women like themselves. Billie entered the military not attracted towards women and soon found a community of women who perhaps suspected she might develop such attractions even before she acknowledged it herself. Moreover, each of these women continued the lesbian friendships they made in the military and remain friends with their fellow servicewomen to this day. Because of their shared experience of romantic liaisons, friendships, sports and parties while in the military, these women formed long-lasting community. That community occurred at a crucial time in the development of each woman’s lesbian subjectivity. In the case of Cheryl and Barb, the military was the point of transition between an isolated same-sex relationship and early awareness of lesbianism, and involvement in larger-scale lesbian communities. The military enabled both to see that there were many others like themselves in Canada and gave them a sense of belonging. Billie’s experience of the military was rather different, in that she had not had a prior same-sex relationship, but military service was the context in which same-sex attractions began to surface and eventually were expressed.

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<sup>757</sup> Billie, personal interview, 23 September 1998.

## **Sports and Community**

Sports were important in the formation of lesbian communities in the military and elsewhere.<sup>758</sup> As Barb reports, many lesbians were involved in sports, especially in ball teams in the 1950s and 1960s. “Most of the women on the ball teams were gay women,” she claims. Barb and her friends also formed a bowling league in the 1950s and called it “Marilyn Monroe.”<sup>759</sup> She had always been involved in sports, and in the military was exposed to the heavy lesbian presence on ball teams. Given that sporting events were occasions when women could meet each other socially, could be very physical while incurring less comment about their appearance—although femininity was still emphasized in sports—and could gather in large groups without the presence of men, sports were and are a crucial part of community formation for lesbians.

Among the narrators, Barb, Cheryl, Pam, Chris, Magda and Tricia all identified sports as both a personal interest and a place where they could meet other women. Baseball was by far the most popular lesbian sport. Tricia, interviewed by the Lesbians Making History Project, remembered:

there were baseball teams - they weren't called lesbian baseball teams. Some of them were the industrial league. But you could always be sure, if you went to the baseball games, that some of the team were going to be lesbian. Those

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<sup>758</sup> As Susan Cahn indicates, the mannish lesbian athlete was a particularly powerful stereotype in postwar America. Susan Cahn, “From the ‘Muscle Moll’ to the ‘Butch’ Ballplayer: Mannishness, Lesbianism, and Homophobia in U.S. Women’s Sport,” in Martha Vicinus, ed. *Lesbian Subjects: A Feminist Studies Reader* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 42. I would argue that although the image was a negative stereotype used against all female athletes, there was an element of truth in it. Sport, and baseball in particular, was one of the few opportunities for long-term single-sex female bonding and thus was a crucial part of community for many a lesbian, as indeed it is today.

<sup>759</sup> Barb, personal interview, 15 May 1998.

baseball teams were going on in the 'fifties, that's for sure, because I played baseball for the city.<sup>760</sup>

An important part of a lesbian subjectivity is an awareness of others like oneself, and Tricia reveals in this statement that she knew that there were others like herself and that they could be found at baseball games.

When the scouts came around for the more prominent ball clubs, Tricia was chosen to play for a senior team, but her mother would not let her go. "And the only reason she gave me was that the women were too tough. I was devastated and angry." It is unclear from the interview whether Tricia was devastated because her baseball career was over, because she was denied access to the lesbian ball players, or both. That her mother held her back because of the presence of tough women might suggest that she knew that there were many lesbians on ball teams, but it could also suggest that she thought that the women were simply unrespectable, since women in team sports were often working-class and were thought to be promiscuous.

Athletic women had long been the subject of debate in North America. As Susan Cahn indicates, the female athlete represented "both the appealing and threatening aspects of modern womanhood."<sup>761</sup> At the turn of the century, a moderate level of athleticism began to be acceptable, even desired, in girls and women, but too much physical exertion would, it was argued, make women "mannish." Despite the fears of the masculinizing tendencies of women's sports, however, the predominant stereotype early in the century was not of the lesbian sportswoman. Warnings about the dangers of sports for women "linked the physical release of sport with a loss of heterosexual *control*, not of *inclination*. The most frequently used derogatory term for women athletes was 'Muscle Moll.'<sup>762</sup> In its only other usages, the word "moll"

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<sup>760</sup> Tricia, LMH interview, 21 September 1986.

<sup>761</sup> Susan K. Cahn, "From the 'Muscle Moll' to the 'Butch' Ballplayer," 43.

<sup>762</sup> Susan K. Cahn, "From the 'Muscle Moll' to the 'Butch' Ballplayer," 45.

referred to either the female lovers of male gangsters or to prostitutes. Both represented disreputable, *heterosexually* deviant women.

Little work has been done on the history of lesbians in Canadian sport. Certainly, Canadian doctors, like their colleagues south of the border, decried the influence some sports had on femininity.<sup>763</sup> The fact that the narrators identify sport, and baseball in particular, as one of the means by which they were able to socialize with other lesbians, and the degree to which sports are still important social events to lesbians, should indicate to us that sports have been important community builders.

## **Conclusion**

For many lesbian women before feminism, community was hard to find and difficult to maintain, but absolutely crucial to survival. Lesbians found community wherever they could. Only some lived openly in the public communities about which articles and novels were written. In suburbs, in isolated couples, in small groups of friends, other lesbians lived secretly behind the walls of respectability. This chapter has explored only some of the forms of community among lesbians in the period 1920-1960. Many others doubtless existed, and it will be the task of future historians to seek those out. The main task of this chapter has been to introduce into the historical record a group of lesbians previously little discussed in Canada. Lower middle-class and upper working-class lesbians, because they were neither significant political or literary figures in romantic friendships nor public transgressors of heteronormativity and gender, have not featured prominently in discussions of lesbian community.

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<sup>763</sup> Helen Lenskyj's numerous works on women in sport in Canada reveal that many sports were thought to masculinize women. See, for example, her "Femininity First: Sport and Physical Education for Ontario Girls, 1890-1930," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport* 13, 2 (December 1982), 4-17.

I argue here that there existed in Canada before 1965 at least three different kinds of lesbian community, each intimately linked to class. In the early twentieth century, upper middle-class women were living in newer versions of the romantic friendship. Their links to other lesbians were formed in middle-class milieux, such as universities and colleges, professions, and gatherings of respectable yet politically and socially aware women. These women were reticent about expressing their attraction to other women and developed linguistic clues to indicate and test for same-sex relationships. The language of “devotion,” having its roots in the socially-approved romantic friendships of earlier centuries, could be used in the twentieth century to express the kind of “noble” love these women regarded themselves as having for one another. It could also operate as a signifier of a lesbian presence and could be used to announce and to seek out lesbian contact. Such relationships continued well into the twentieth century, albeit with new twists under the influence of psychological discourse.

The working-class bar community of the mid-twentieth century has been amply covered by such historians as Chenier and Chamberland. The interviews done for this study support their portrayals of the bar culture. My own narrators, albeit from outsider perspectives, confirm the importance of the butch-femme relationship in working-class lesbian life and the links between the bar community and the world of drugs and prostitution. The Lesbians Making History Project interviews acknowledge those aspects of bar culture but also make it apparent that the culture was very important to the women who were “in the life” and that in many ways it was enjoyable. The bar community had its own cultural norms, firmly policed boundaries, and a stake in a very visible lifestyle.

Among lower middle-class lesbians one finds an ambivalence about the public bar community. The narrators for this study, who, whatever their personal backgrounds, were almost exclusively of upper working-class and lower middle-class status as adults before 1965, either did not know of the bar scene, knew of it and avoided it, or visited it only occasionally. All those women who did visit the bars felt uncomfortable there and felt that they did not entirely

belong. All portrayed the bar scene in unfavourable terms and had little that was positive to say about the butch-femme scene.

It would be incorrect, I suggest, to portray these women either as closeted and uptight middle-class women whose place in lesbian history is therefore marginal, or as brave and faultless heroines who countered the odds and formed community in the face of homophobia. They are at once both of these things and neither. Their stories indicate, rather, that class and sexual orientation are always entwined and that they can work with and against each other in the same individual and simultaneously. The narrators' condemnation of the bar women certainly does not do justice to the bar women's courage to fight for public space for lesbians, nor to the contribution of the bar culture to a vibrant and diverse lesbian history. Their antipathy to the bar culture arises from their middle-class norms. But to portray them as less courageous than the women of the bar culture is to negate the courage they showed in socializing at all as lesbians when there was considerable material risk involved. They are instead women who formed a particular kind of community, courageous in its own way and liberating for the women concerned, which helped them to realize lesbian subjectivities and to find partners and social support, yet simultaneously was condemnatory of other lesbians based on their class attributes.

For all these types of lesbian, community was an important element in the development of a lesbian subjectivity. The upper middle-class lesbians in modern versions of the romantic friendship, the bar women, and the lower middle-class women of the house parties, despite their class differences, shared one thing: they sought out the company of other women based on same-sex attraction and found in that company a reflection and affirmation of self, of lesbian self. In each case, the finding of community took a lesbian subjectivity beyond the "I" stage and further into the "we" stage. Their sexual orientation became part of something larger than simply themselves, larger than a single same-sex relationship. It became an experience and a mode of living shared with others. The finding of community and community norms consequently lie at the centre of these women's life stories.

## CONCLUSION

When I began research for this dissertation, my intention was to deconstruct the essentialism of twentieth-century discourses on lesbianism and bisexuality, and to show the ways in which sexuality was and is mutable, contingent, and fluid. As often happens in academic research, the study evolved into something else entirely. While I do still hold to a social constructionist perspective on sexuality, my conversations with the women whose narratives form the basis of this work, and my reading of those few collections of lesbian and bisexual women's letters and journals left to us, have necessitated a different approach. This dissertation has evolved into a study of narratives of lesbian and bisexual subjectivity rather than of lesbianism and bisexuality per se. What I mean by this is that, although I have indeed researched the content of these women's relationships, the nature of their desires, and the concrete circumstances of the heteronormative world in which they lived, this study aims more to provide an analysis of the ways in which these women's subjectivities were formed and expressed than to offer a definitive statement about the nature of female same-sex sexuality in the years before second-wave feminism.

This dissertation has explored several aspects of women's intimate relationships with other women in the period 1910-1965. Chapter One examined the various "public" discourses regarding sexuality in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada. Most public discourses concerned appropriate and inappropriate heterosexuality, as it was that which was the major social concern. Only just emerging in the late nineteenth century, and only gradually spreading beyond the medical profession and the realms of sexology in the twentieth century, was a discourse concerning homosexuality. Few in Canadian society were privy to the new terminologies regarding, and the new methods of policing, those who strayed from the heterosexual path. Most Canadians in the period under study remained ignorant of the new

sexual worlds emerging in large cities and were trained to see heterosexual delinquency rather than gay or lesbian behaviours.

In Chapter Two I outlined the childhoods, adolescent years, and young adulthoods of many of the women whose histories are the focus of this study. All the narrators were exposed to dominant discourses of heterosexuality. They knew, for example, either by direct information or by the absence of alternatives, that they were supposed to marry and have children upon adulthood, and that adult heterosexuality would be preceded by a period of adolescent dating. They knew that premarital sexual activity was regarded as immoral, and that single motherhood was a fate to be avoided at all costs. But although heterosexuality and motherhood were their assumed destinies, the narrators were given little information about what those things entailed. They were told little about their bodies as they were growing up, and little about the reproductive process.

Chapter Two showed that the narrators came from a variety of backgrounds and that there is no correspondence between their sexualities and any particular class grouping, geographical location, or quality of family life. While medical professionals and others in the period under study, and particularly in the postwar period, would account for homosexuality by way of reference to dysfunctional family structures and childhood unhappiness, life histories of lesbians and gay men, discussed in this study and in other works, show clearly that homosexuality lurked everywhere, even in happy families. A few of the narrators for this study came from families in which alcoholism and violence were problems, but the majority described their childhoods as happy ones.

The evidence discussed in Chapter Three shows that little information was available to the narrators on the subject of sexuality; most realized their desires through exploration and experimentation. The testimonies show that women engaged in a wide range of sexual practices with other women, from vaginal penetration with or without dildos, to fondling and sleeping together, all without having been told about the pleasures of the female body. Many of the

narrators describe their same-sex experiences as “right” and “natural”, and some compare those experiences to opposite-sex ones, which they describe as uncomfortable or less appealing.

In Chapter Three, I suggested that care needed to be taken not to assume too much sexual ignorance in women prior to the spread of public information about sexuality in the twentieth century, but also that historians needed to be wary of assuming that twentieth-century women were well-informed about sexual matters. The evidence discussed in Chapter Three demonstrates two things. It shows that women who, early in the century, had relationships closely approximating romantic friendships did have physical relationships, and that we may therefore have to revise or at least problematize earlier claims that romantic friendships were non-sexual. It also suggests that mid-twentieth-century women, who were assumed to be sexual and allegedly had access to much more information about sexuality than did their forebears, actually knew very little about sexuality and formed sexual relationships largely through experimentation.

Chapter Four examined female same-sex relationships between 1910 and 1965. This chapter showed that the school and the workplace were important sites for the formation of relationships between women, because they provided numerous opportunities for same-sex social contacts. Chapter Four also addressed the nature of same-sex relationships and argued that relationships between women often involved similar pleasures and problems as heterosexual relationships. Women did court other women, but same-sex relationships moved to a physical sexuality perhaps somewhat earlier than heterosexual ones. Like heterosexual people, lesbians desired committed and long-term relationships. Often this was achieved, but same-sex relationships were also affected by infidelity, alcoholism, and physical abuse.

Women who were attracted to other women in the early to mid-twentieth century balanced their same-sex relationships with family relationships. It might be assumed that lesbians in this era, prior to feminism and gay rights, and prior to the legal changes of recent years, had very problematic relationships with families because of their sexual orientation.

Chapter Four argues, however, that separation from family because of lesbianism was actually less common in the period 1910 to 1965 than it would become in the 1970s and 1980s, when a discourse of lesbian families became available and when lesbian communities had grown to the extent that a supportive alternative could be found to homophobic families. Many lesbians growing up and forming relationships between 1910 and 1965, and particularly before the psychological discourse about homosexuality became widespread in the 1950s, remained close to their families, with sexuality forming a site of conflict but not of irrevocable division.

Chapter Five explored lesbian communities in Canada from 1910 to 1965. There existed three kinds of lesbian community in the period under study: small groups of middle-class friends who shared a “devotion” to other women and could be said to be living in twentieth-century version of the romantic friendship; working-class women in the public bar scene of downtown Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver in the 1940s and 1950s; and lower middle-class and upper working-class women whose social worlds existed largely away from the bar scene. In all of these cases, women formed friendships and social networks based on their same-sex desires. Chapter Five demonstrated that the lesbian community in Canada was clearly divided along lines of class. My focus in this chapter was on lower middle-class women, who have largely been neglected in lesbian history. The narrators for this study, who come primarily from this group, constructed their subjectivities in relation both to sexuality and to class. They clearly differentiated themselves and their social world from working-class butch and femme women and from the bar culture.

The chapters described above involved several important theoretical considerations. The first of these involves the very definition of “lesbian” and “bisexual.” If I were to agree with those who claim that one can only call “lesbian” or “bisexual” those women who can be proven to have had same-sex genital relationships, or who stated clearly that they were lesbian or bisexual, I could not have included in this study any of the women whose written records I use. Although there is evidence of physical intimacy, in none of the written records do we find

evidence of genital sexuality, and nor did these women use the words “lesbian” and “bisexual.” But I argue here that these women *should* be included in this study. Not only must we not restrict lesbianism to the genital, but also we must be attuned to the ways in which women in the past defined, described, and *disguised* their sexualities. Because of the secrecy with which non-heterosexual people have had to live in homophobic societies, the historian must look for things that are neither said by historical subjects nor seen in historical records when we are looking with a traditional historical gaze.

Throughout these chapters is an analysis of the importance of several elements—childhood, attractions, sexual activity, formation of relationships, community, and relationships with family—in the formation of lesbian or bisexual subjectivities. The interviews conducted for this study, combined with the written records used, show that the narrators’ subjectivities altered during the period under study, and that a changing sense of self in relation to sexual orientation was part of that alteration. Few used identity labels about themselves during the period in question, most coming to those terms and the ideas associated with them much later, after feminism had made the terminology both more accessible and less pathological.

Those few women who had heard the words “lesbian” and “bisexual” in the period under study did not, for the most part, apply the words to themselves, feeling that the terms’ pathological emphasis did not relate to their personal experiences and feelings. Instead, many of them were aware that they were different, and that they were attracted to women, but they did not use an identity label with which to name their desire. Nevertheless, most of the narrators for this study construct their narratives in relation to an eventual realization of a lesbian identity. Many can identify feelings they had as children which, in hindsight if not at the time, persuaded them that they were attracted to girls rather than boys, women rather than men. Many of the narrators acted on those feelings when they were quite young and remember those experiences as more satisfying, intense, and “natural” than their heterosexual contacts.

I have used the term “subjectivity” throughout this dissertation rather than the term “identity.” Identity labels imply stable and fixed essences or a search for them. The identity category “lesbian” has within it two further identity categories: the “romantic friend” and the “butch” or “femme” lesbian. These forms of lesbianism were important in lesbian experience before the rise of the homophile movement and of lesbian-feminism and consequently have been the major focus of historical works on lesbian culture and politics. Lesbian communities and historians have sought out these recognizable lesbians in order to provide historical foundation for community pride, activism, and legal rights. Unfortunately, the subjectivities of lower middle-class lesbians have been made culturally unintelligible in this process by lesbians’ and historians’ desire to restore to the historical narrative the stories of these foremothers of lesbian community and activism.

This dissertation has challenged the invisibility of these undefined women and has argued that we need to consider more seriously the lives of this middle group of lesbians. Their own perspective on lesbian history, albeit often defined via condemnation of working-class norms of relationships and community, is an important one, for surely it was women such as these who were the majority among lesbians before 1965. Only a very few were romantic friends or lived in butch/femme bar communities. The majority of lesbians lived much quieter and more anonymous lives than these, and it is important that we now begin to research their subjectivities.

The second reason for using “subjectivity” is that the written records available do not contain mention of identity categories, and yet one can clearly identify emotions and behaviours indicating the existence of same-sex relationships. Were one to reject these sources on the basis of their lack of use of identity labels, these very important documents would be lost to lesbian history. Using them, we can show that there were women in Canadian society who, before the popularization of the label “lesbian,” had an awareness of their sexual and emotional attraction to women and formed relationships, both romantic and otherwise, on that basis. These women did not use identity labels, but rather employed phrases denoting their attraction, such as “awfully

devoted” and “odd women.” These phrases, coupled with the evidence that these women conceived of their relationships as life-long and committed ones akin to marriages, tell us that these were lesbian subjectivities. For bisexual women who leave behind written records, the use of the term “subjectivity” is perhaps even more important, as there was not in the period under study an identity category, separate and unique, for bisexuals.

Finally, although many of the narrators themselves use the identity labels “lesbian” or “gay” in the present day, few of them used such labels before the 1970s. Their use of them occurs at a stage in the development of their subjectivities when the terms themselves have become more common in use among women attracted to other women, have become less pathologized and more publicly acceptable, and have been linked to their social communities for some time. Lesbianism now has its own language, its own norms, and its own ritualistic narratives of self-discovery. In that discourse, the identity label “lesbian” is at once the essential thing to be discovered and revealed to the world and the ultimate achievement. That the narrators have expressed their life stories in the terms of that discourse and as narratives of triumph over adversity is not therefore surprising.

The narratives examined in this dissertation can be viewed either as narratives of discovery of an inherent identity or as narratives of construction of a subjectivity. In a sense, they are both. For the narrators, these are stories of discovery, of triumph over homophobia, and of the eventual coming home to an identity. But they are also narratives of construction which reveal several important stages in the development of subjectivities based on same-sex attraction. Most of the narrators, whether at the time or in hindsight, identified attractions to other girls as a feature of their early lives. The development of subjectivities based on those attractions depended very much on what happened next. Physical expression of the attraction and an early emotional relationship with another girl or woman resulted in many of the narrators in a solidification of their subjectivity and an awareness not only of their difference from most other girls but also of shared experience. Whereas before they had simply been a girl whose

attractions were not as society said they ought to be, now they were a girl who shared that attraction with at least one other person. If the relationship were deeply emotional as well, subjectivity was even more greatly enhanced.

Language and community were also important influences in the formation of subjectivity, for having a language with which to explain one's attractions and having a community with which to share them, and in which they could be freely expressed, allowed women to explore their sexuality further, to have it validated, and to know that, even though it was proscribed by society, there was a reasonably safe arena in which their sexuality was normal and unquestioned. The importance of language and community can be seen both in the interview testimonies and in many of the written sources used for this study.

The notion of lesbian identity has been a very important element in the creation of lesbian communities, in the struggle for legal recognition and freedom from discrimination, and in the increasing public awareness of same-sex relationships between women. Although based in negative portrayals of lesbians and gay men as biological mistakes or the products of dysfunctional social construction, lesbian identity has proved a useful organizing tool and element in lesbian self-esteem, for it posits an inherent part of an individual for which the individual cannot be blamed and should not be punished. Little wonder, then, that almost all lesbian narratives of the late twentieth century use a coming out, triumph over closetedness and homophobia plot structure. This is the story that has allowed us to fight for social and legal recognition and to preserve the strength not to cave in to heteronormativity. And now that bisexual identity is becoming more accepted, identity-based narratives will doubtless become more common among bisexuals as well.

In order to appreciate lesbians and bisexual women as historical beings, however, and to recognize that we, like other historical subjects, are products of discourse and are works in progress, we must balance an acknowledgement of the importance of identity-based narratives with a recognition of the constructedness of subjectivity. In this sense, essentialism and social

construction may not be in conflict so much as they are parts of a broader picture. The essentialist, coming out narrative is itself part of the construction of a subjectivity of same-sex desire and being. The lesbian identity which appears as the end product in that narrative is simply an element in a longer story of subjectivity. The women whose narratives are examined in this study will continue to construct their subjectivities, and even the women whose written records are left to us, who are now dead, will be similarly constructed and reconstructed as lesbians, as historians understand more about the intricate processes shaping and re-shaping lesbian subjectivity.

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## **APPENDIX A: LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT**

1. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The participant has the right to withdraw at any time, or to refuse to answer any given question or number of questions. No explanation will be required.
2. Anonymity of the participant will be protected throughout this study. Pseudonyms will be used in relation to interview material used in the dissertation, and all other information which might possibly identify the participant or other individuals will be altered so as to disguise their identity.
3. Confidentiality of the information obtained in this study is assured. All recorded information will be kept in a locked room to which only the researcher will have access. No other person will have access to this information without the participant's prior written consent.
4. Recording of information: The participant gives the researcher permission to:
  - (a) Audiotape the interview.
  - (b) Make written notes only.

Please indicate in words the method of recording you are permitting\_\_\_\_\_

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5. The recordings made of the information obtained in the interviews, and all other information will be:
  - (a) Destroyed after the study is complete.
  - (b) Preserved in their complete form in the British Columbia Provincial Archives.
  - (c) Preserved in transcript form only, with all identifying information removed, in the British Columbia Provincial Archives.

Please indicate in words the requirements for destruction or preservation of the material.

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6. If the recordings of the interview are to be preserved in the British Columbia Provincial Archives, the participant places the following restrictions on their use:

- (a) There is no restriction on access to the interview recordings.
- (b) The interview recordings may not be examined without the prior written consent of the participant.
- (c) The interview recordings may not be examined until after the death of the participant.
- (d) The interview recordings may not be examined until the year\_\_\_\_\_
- (e) Other restrictions\_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate in words the restrictions you are placing on access\_\_\_\_\_

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7. The participant does/does not request that a copy of the interview recordings be given to them free of charge by the researcher\_\_\_\_\_

Signed this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ 19

Karen Duder (Researcher) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

The following questionnaire was created for the original research project, which sought information about heterosexual women in addition to lesbian and bisexual women. The dissertation was subsequently narrowed to cover the latter two groups only.

### **SESSION ONE: BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND (Note: This session will have been preceded by the informal meeting session outlined in the proposal for the research)**

**The following questions will be the main guiding questions for the research. Other, related questions may arise from answers given in the interview, and the gender of the terms used in some questions will depend on the participant's stated sexual preference.**

Name  
 Present Address  
 Length of Residence  
 Place of Birth  
 Date of Birth  
 Mother's place of birth & nationality  
 Father's place of birth & nationality  
 If immigrants to Canada, when did they arrive?  
 Mother's age at birth of participant  
 Father's age at birth of participant  
 Mother's occupation (before and after marriage)  
 Father's occupation  
 Places lived between birth and 1950  
 Number of sisters and brothers alive before 1950  
 Position in family  
 Schools, colleges, universities attended before 1950  
 Religion (has that always been participant's denomination?)  
 Marital status of participant and, if married, widowed or divorced, date of marriage etc.  
 If never married, whether or not the participant has lived with a partner for a long period of time  
 Age, nationality, occupation and sex of partner  
 Number of children and when born  
 Participant's employment history to 1950

### **SESSION TWO, PART ONE: CHILDHOOD**

Did you enjoy your childhood?  
 What did you enjoy most?  
 What did you not enjoy about your childhood?  
 Did you get along with all your siblings?  
 How did you feel towards your parents when you were growing up?  
 Were they strict?  
 Did you go to church as a child?  
 Who did you play with when you were a child?

Were there any children you were not allowed to play with? Why?  
 Were there any families in your neighbourhood who were from other racial groups?  
 Were there children from other races at your school?  
 Were they among your friends?  
 What chores did you have to do as a child?  
 What did your brother/s have to do?  
 What did your sister/s have to do?  
 What subjects did you take at school?  
 Did your sister/s and/or brother/s take different subjects at school?  
 Did you like or dislike school?  
 When did you leave school?  
 Was there any particular reason that you had to leave school when you did?  
 When did your brother/s and sister/s leave school?  
 How would you describe your adolescence?  
 Were you shy or extroverted as a teenager?  
 Did you read much? What sort of reading material?  
 What was it about those books or magazines that you liked?  
 Can you remember any of the stories?  
 Did you wear makeup when you were a teenager?  
 What was your parents' opinion of wearing makeup?  
 Did either of your parents drink alcohol or smoke?  
 Did you drink alcohol or smoke?  
 If yes, when did you begin? What was your parents' response?  
 What was your favourite style of dress when you were growing up?  
 What kind of recreational activities did you enjoy? (eg. sports, outdoor activities, crafts, music, art etc)  
 Did you think of yourself, or did other people ever tell you that you were a “tomboy”?  
 Did you have any special friends of either sex?  
 How long were you friends?  
 How did you get to know them?  
 How often would you see them?  
 How intimately would you confide in them?  
 What would you talk about with your friends?  
 Did your parents approve of your friends?

## **SESSION TWO, PART TWO: SOCIALIZING & SEXUAL KNOWLEDGE**

**(Note: depending on the length of time Session Two, Part One takes, Part Two may be conducted at a later date, if the participant so desires)**

Did you socialize with friends at home when you lived with your parents?  
 Other than at home, where would you meet your friends to socialize?  
 With whom would you go out?  
 Did you go out with anyone from another racial group?  
 Did you go to the movies?  
 Which ones do you remember seeing? How did you feel about the stories at the time?  
 Did you go to balls or more informal dances?

What type of dancing did you prefer?  
 How close would you get to your dance partner?  
 Were you ever uncomfortable about the closeness of any of your dance partners?  
 How did your socializing change once you moved away from home?  
 Did you go to clubs or bars?  
 If yes, what was it about the clubs or bars that appealed to you?  
 Did the clubs or bars that you attended have a distinct type of customer?  
 How freely could women and men mix?  
 What did you particularly like about the atmosphere or the clientele?  
 Was it widely known to your family and friends that you went there, or was it kept secret from some?  
 Were you aware of any negative opinions towards the places you went to socialize with friends?  
 When did you first learn about human anatomy?  
 When did you first learn about sex?  
 Who was it who told you about the human body and sex?  
 Did your parents give you reading material on the subject?  
 How much did you learn at school about human biology?  
 How much were you told about sex?  
 Were you told in what circumstances it was good and bad to have sexual relations? What were you told?  
 What were you told about pregnancy outside of marriage?  
 Did you know anyone who got pregnant outside of marriage?  
 If so, how did those around you react to or describe that person?  
 What were you told about masturbation?  
 Was anything said to you about sexual relationships between people of the same sex?  
 How were homosexual women and men described to you?  
 Did you know any homosexual women or men when you were growing up?  
 When was the first time you met someone who you knew was homosexual?  
 Where were you at the time?  
 How did you feel towards them?

### **SESSION THREE: PERSONAL SEXUALITY**

**The participant will be reminded at this stage that they may refuse to answer any question or questions without explanation.**

What would you say is your sexual preference?  
 When did you first apply that word to yourself?  
 Have you always felt that that you were [stated preference]?  
 Have you ever been attracted to a person of the [same, opposite - conflicting with stated preference] sex?  
 Are there any other words you have used to describe your sexual preference in the past?  
 When was your first feeling of attraction towards another person?  
 Would you describe it as an emotional or a physical attraction, or both?  
 What sex was that person?  
 What was your relationship to that person: were they a friend, acquaintance, teacher etc?  
 What made you realize that you were attracted to them?

What feelings did you have?  
 Did you talk about your feelings to that person?  
 Did you talk about your feelings to anyone else?  
 Did you write about your feelings in a journal?  
 Were your feelings reciprocated?  
 Did you feel uncomfortable about being attracted to that person? If so, in what ways did you feel uncomfortable?  
 Did you feel ashamed about your feelings?  
 Did you ever touch yourself intimately when you were growing up?  
 If so, did anyone know that you did? What was their response?  
 When and where did you have your first intimate experience with another person?  
 With whom did you have that first experience?  
 How long had you known them?  
 Was it also their first intimate experience?  
 How did you feel about it at the time?  
 What ideas had you had beforehand about what it would be like?  
 Did your first experience meet with those expectations?  
 What was it that you did? Did you have intercourse? [specific phrasing of question will depend on stated sexual preference]  
 How often would you say you had intimate contacts after that?  
 Was it always with a person of the [same or opposite depending on previous testimony] sex?  
 Did you ever have a relationship with a person from another racial group?  
 If not, why not?  
 What did you think about mixed-race relationships?  
 What did your family and friends think about them?  
 Can you tell me about your relationships up to 1950?

**Here a more open structure will be used, in which the participant talks about their relationships with only minor prompting from the researcher. It is hoped that after this period of discussion, the participant will feel comfortable about questions which relate to the relationships they have described but focus more on the aspect of sexuality.**

Having told me about your early relationships, how would you describe the way you felt about sex in those relationships?  
 You may be familiar with the expression “Lie back and think of Mother England,” talking about women’s enduring of unpleasant sexual relations. Did you ever feel that sex was a matter of endurance, or did you enjoy it?  
 How would you know that your partner wanted sexual relations?  
 How would you convey to your partner that you wanted sexual relations?  
 Were there ever occasions when you did not want sexual relations, but your partner did, and you ended up having sex?  
 How did you feel about that?  
 Were there ever any occasions when one of you wanted to do something different and the other refused?  
 How did you feel about that?  
 Did your feelings about sex change over time?

Did you know from the beginning what you would like and dislike or was that something you learned about yourself over time?

Were there any of your partners [if participant had multiple partners] who taught you more about sex than others?

Did you ever feel that you were teaching your partner/s about sex?

Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your sexual relationships?

**This final session will be tiring and difficult for the participants and may in some cases have to be broken up. In order that the participant is not left “hanging” after this session, the researcher will return at a later date (but not too long after this session) for an informal session during which no questions will be asked but the participant may give further information if she has thought of some. The intention of this session, however, is not to pursue the subject further, but rather to provide closure, by means of a conversation with the participant about her life after 1950.**

## **APPENDIX C: ADVERTISEMENTS**

### **1. FOR REGULAR MEDIA**

Female history PhD student seeks to interview women aged 55 and over about their personal relationships and social life in the period 1910-1965. I am interested in hearing about friendships, romantic relationships, courting and marriage. I am keen to hear about all types of relationships. Participants should have lived in either British Columbia or Ontario for at least five years during that period. Confidentiality is assured, and pseudonyms will be used to disguise identity. Interviews will be conducted at your convenience and in your locality. Please write to Karen Duder, Department of History, University of Victoria, P.O. Box 3045, Victoria, B.C. V8W 3P4, or phone (604) 721-7394.

### **2. FOR LESBIAN & FEMINIST MEDIA**

Lesbian history PhD student seeks to interview lesbian/gay and bisexual women aged 55 and over about their personal relationships and social life in the period 1910-65. I am interested in hearing about the history of lesbian and bisexual women's lives in Canada. Participants should have lived in either British Columbia or Ontario for at least five years during that period. Confidentiality is assured, and pseudonyms will be used to disguise identity. Interviews will be conducted at your convenience and in your locality. Please write to Karen Duder, Department of History, University of Victoria, P.O. Box 3045, Victoria, B.C. V8W 3P4, or phone (604) 721-7394.