

**DANCING ACROSS BORDERS:**  
**Women Who Become Lesbians in Mid-life**

by

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# DECLARATION

I certify that, except where acknowledged, this thesis is the original work  
of the candidate alone.

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Kristin Henry  
March 2004

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## **Abstract**

This thesis combines theoretical discussion with extracts from transcribed focus groups and interviews to illuminate the impact on the identity of formerly heterosexual women who become lesbians in mid-life. I have conducted my research as participant observer who has this core experience in common with the other subjects. I have also included my poetry and journal extracts to track and comment on the project and the topic.

The accounts from twenty-three focus group members and interviewees contribute in two ways to the gap in published literature about the coming out process. First, this is to my knowledge the only Australian study of this kind. Second, the women's stories differ from other collections of coming out narratives because they do not, as a rule, privilege the lesbian experience over the heterosexual one. Instead the study focuses on what changed for the women when they made this transition, and on what stayed the same. They discuss these changes and lack of change with regard to personal identity, relationships with other women, children and families, friends, the workplace and the wider culture. The study investigates how all these elements of the women's lives have been influenced by their own maturity and by the prevailing social attitudes toward homosexuality at the time they came out. It also discusses the women's various attitudes toward the lesbian community and the politics of labelling themselves according to their sexual orientation.

The study is underpinned by theoretical perspectives on the formation of identity, on current thinking about sex and gender, and on an understanding of the evolving positions of lesbians and gays in the eyes of the church, the law, psychology and society in general. It pays particular attention to the relationship between lesbianism and feminism, and the impact of queer theory on lesbian identity. It also examines the changing nature of representations of lesbians in popular culture.

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***Introduction***

Coming out as a lesbian can be problematic at any age, but it can be particularly challenging for the older woman. By the time she is forty she has spent half her life identifying herself, and being identified by others, as heterosexual. She has established circles of friends and colleagues as well as complex family relationships, which may include marriage and children. People think they know her, and she probably thought she knew herself. In the midst of this transition some women will ask themselves questions about who they really are, who they have been, and how the two are connected.

By middle age a woman will have internalised at least some of her culture's prevailing attitudes regarding gender, sexuality and identity. Having a lesbian relationship publicly for the first time in mid-life might mean relinquishing some of the older roles and labels by which she is known, and has defined herself, within her concentric relationship circles. It might also mean taking on new roles and labels, and communities, or at least experimenting with them. And ironically, at the very stage when she might have expected the sexual invisibility experienced by many women in their forties, she finds instead that she is standing in the glare of the sexual spotlight.

At forty-eight, after being divorced and remarried; after raising two children; after appearing to the world and myself as enthusiastically heterosexual, I fell in love with another woman. As a heterosexual woman I had been able to consider my sexuality a private matter. But as a lesbian I saw my private life enter a public sphere in which my relationship drew reactions ranging from curiosity and speculation to embarrassment and hostility.

I became acutely aware for the first time of how much information about ourselves we give away to complete strangers without a second thought. I had never before hesitated about handing over photographs to be developed, or about putting a new message on the answering machine, or about what the postman thought when he delivered letters to my house. And, while some women will have intended this new stage of their life to be a political and therefore a public statement, others like myself who are impelled initially by desire will be surprised, not only by the public appropriation of their lives, but also that political meanings are attached to their behaviour. It took me a while to realise that being out as a lesbian was for me unavoidably a political stance.

Over the years I'd met or heard of several middle-aged women who had had, at least broadly, an experience similar to mine. I wanted to know if they had faced the same adjustments I had, and how these might have differed from those faced by women who had been lesbians from an earlier age. Most of all I wanted to find out what sort of things they had discovered about themselves. It seemed logical to me that the longer a woman spends constructing a heterosexual identity, both internally and publicly, the more occasions there will be for challenges to that identity when she chooses to live as a lesbian, but I didn't start out with a hypothesis so much as a set of questions about identity and the new lesbian. How much *new* construction work is necessary? How much *deconstruction*? At forty, or fifty, or sixty, how much of her previous self can she carry over into her new life? How much can she leave behind?

I decided I would try and answer those questions myself, because I could find little published literature that shed any direct light on my personal experience of leaving the heterosexual mainstream in mid-life to live openly with another woman. There were plenty of books documenting coming-out stories, and even some which focused on women who had been previously married. But they all suggested that the transition from heterosexual life to lesbian life was a journey from a bad life to a good life, from restriction to liberation, from fraudulence to authenticity. That was not my story, so when I began this study it was partly with the intention of challenging the primacy of

these existing published accounts which emphasized the ‘I always was different’ narrative.

Before I go any further, I think it is important to say what I was *not* trying to do with my research. The topic is so broad, so complex, and so open to misinterpretation that it is essential to make clear what my parameters were.

First, I was not trying to determine *why* some women start loving other women half-way through their lives. I was concerned instead with the impact and consequences this shift would have on the women in the areas of self-perception, family and friends, work and culture. So, while it has been necessary to examine the formation of identity, and in particular sexual identity, within a theoretical framework, the focus of the project is on what changes to identity came with the lived experience.

Second, this is *not* a study of lesbians. It is, very specifically, a study of women who come to a public expression, and in some cases a private discovery, of lesbianism after living publicly as a heterosexual for at least thirty-five years. There is a difference between these two subjects. In fact there are many differences. If there were not I wouldn’t be writing the thesis. If there were not differences, the stories these women told me would have already been told elsewhere in accounts of coming out. But I don’t think they have been, at least not all of them.

I expect that some people are not going to like what they read. In this study, I have exposed the most private areas of the women’s lives to public scrutiny. That old feminist motto, ‘The personal is political’ was never far from my mind as my work was progressing. It rings true here for two reasons. The personal experiences of my participants and myself led us to an awareness of a wider context within which to examine issues of identity and social possibilities. And also, I realized that I was dealing with the politics of what is sayable. The risks and costs of researching, contributing to and writing about such personal and highly emotive subjects only became clear when I began to get reactions from others who read extracts as the thesis developed.

Chapter 1 details the methodology I used for the study. It explains the origins of feminist and qualitative research, ethnography and participant observation, and discusses my reasons for choosing to work with these methods. In this chapter I outline my procedure for finding participants, the choice and appropriateness of focus groups, the methods used in gathering, recording and organizing data. I discuss how my poetry and journal entries provided me with different voices with which to comment and speculate on the discoveries I was making. I also give a brief biographical introduction for each of the twenty-three women who participated in the study.

Some early-identified lesbians, whose history has been shaped by that early identification, may read this study and be disappointed to not find their experience represented. But this is not their story. And, except for the fact that I am one twenty-third of the women who participated, it is not *my* story either. To keep this in mind was one of my biggest ethical challenges as a researcher who had something in common with my subjects. If I began the research expecting to get my own experience validated, I was to have that expectation frustrated at least as often as it was met.

Some lesbians, who have a history of being discriminated against, of personal struggle sometimes to the point of physical danger, may question the authority of the women in this study. They may ask by what right women who have enjoyed heterosexual privilege talk about lesbian identity? But this is not about a hierarchy of lesbianism. And it is not even about lesbian identity except for those women for whom something called 'lesbian identity' is central to who they are. This study asks the participants to describe their own struggles. It is concerned with recognising diversity, and determined to challenge the silencing or occlusion of frequently unheard voices. After all, it is precisely in the area of the unspoken that the greatest potential for misunderstanding and misrepresentation lurks.

Some feminists who have devoted decades to raising the status of women may be critical of what they might perceive as political backsliding in the contributions of some

participants. But it was not my role to be a censor either of the issues explored or the language with which that exploration took place. Instead, my ethical responsibility as a researcher has been to be true to the women who trusted me to record their very personal, warts-and-all narratives; trusted me because I made it clear that I was not interested in judging them, only in listening to them.

Having said that, I am aware of the need to understand the women's stories as they exist within a cultural and historical context. In Chapter 2 I trace the development of identity politics and community among lesbians and gay men, and their relationship to lesbian feminism. This chapter also discusses the influence of more recent thinking on issues of gender and sexuality, with particular reference to the impact of AIDS and queer theory. It examines the changing image of the lesbian and gay character in popular culture, and enters into the current discourse around the relevance of sexual orientation as the key to identity.

What I set out to explore was the nexus between different heterosexual identities and the construction of new lesbian identities. I knew there were many different ways to be heterosexual, and I discovered that there are many different kinds of lesbians too. Notions of what constitutes family and partnership vary tremendously among lesbians, as do value systems and dominant perspectives, such as race, politics and religion, from which they view the world. I also expected, and found, individual style and personality to be factors in the transition of any woman from heterosexual to lesbian. In Chapter 3 the women discuss the labels we use to identify ourselves and the process each of us went through to 'become' a lesbian. There are comments on sexual relationships with other women, how they met or defied expectations, and how they differ from relationships with men. And we hear from some women who consider themselves members of sexual minorities within an already marginalized lesbian culture. This chapter focuses on the women's self-image and personal history, and demonstrates just how varied the range of responses to developing and negotiating varieties of lesbian identity can be.

In Chapter 4 the discussion broadens to include our children, family, friends and workmates. It considers the complex and sometimes uneasy relationship we, with our heterosexual histories and our children, have with early-identified lesbians. We talk extensively about motherhood as an identity marker in the heterosexual world, and as a factor in a relationship with a partner and a lesbian community. We talk about having our consciousness raised regarding our heterosexual privilege, and the extent to which being part of a lesbian community affects our transition, friendships and reflections on authenticity, marginalization, stereotypes and role models.

This chapter begins a discussion on lesbian role models, or more accurately, their absence, in our formative years. It considers evidence from other studies, including Charbonneau and Lander's with thirty women ranging from their mid-thirties to mid-fifties who became lesbians in mid-life. The study reported that virtually none of the women ever considered the possibility that they could be lesbians, and were surprised when they did eventually fall in love with a woman (1990).

This discussion is continued in Chapter 5 when we look at the consequent limitations and liberations inherent in ageing. I try to tease out the cohorts of the era in which we grew up, the one in which we came out and our age at the time of coming out. This chapter considers the extent to which these factors have interwoven with the radically changing social mores we have witnessed, and how they have impacted on our transition from heterosexual to lesbian life. By the time I had transcribed the tapes from the focus groups and interviews, I could see that all of us had danced across not one, but three borders: those of sexual identity, age and social history.

As I was writing this thesis, one of the things that continually struck me was the appropriateness of this central metaphor of dancing. So many of the challenges we met in our transition from heterosexual woman to lesbian may be seen as our mastery of new steps. Dancing includes those we do alone before our mirror, or to the music in our heads that only we can hear. It includes the intricate and subtle steps we do with a partner or partners, and those courageous steps we do before an often judgemental audience. In the

three chapters on identity, society and ageing in particular, the discussion often proceeded in terms of the women *relearning* how to maneuver socially, how to regain and maintain balance, and how to move sure-footed around the slipperiest of floors.

In the Conclusion I compare what I found with what I thought I would find when I began this research. The addition of five years and twenty-two voices besides my own has meant that there was quite a difference. And, though I didn't know it at the beginning, a summary of the multifaceted attitudes of such a diverse, frank and fascinating group of women was never going to be a possibility. In the end, I hope it is this fact that emerges as the one unequivocal statement in the study.

\*\*\*

***Chapter One***

**WHO GETS TO GO TO THE BALL: METHODOLOGY**

***Rondo***

*Tell everything you remember and others will say  
it's beautiful but what does it matter how we got here  
we are, but no, the way you tell it is everything.  
The trip not the finish is everything must be explained  
or else isn't true, never wholly true, everything else  
you tell is not holy nor true. We remember particles  
and rearrange them this way to be beautiful and finished.  
Everything's a matter of particles. We all trip  
on explanations and fall into beautiful wholes.  
Oh no, oh everything matters, what we say  
and what others remember must be true. But all  
we've got here is rearranged, beautiful or not,  
and in a way we will never be wholly finished.*

\*

### *Feminist and Qualitative Research Methods*

**Feminist research attempts to lessen the dichotomy that traditional research imposes between thought and feeling, between the personal and the political, between the observed and the observer, between ‘dispassionate’ or ‘objective’ research and ‘passionate’ or ‘subjective’ knowledge.**

**Esther Madriz, in Denzin and Lincoln (1994:836)**

Two of the most complex areas of divided thinking on research methods in the humanities and social sciences have to do with the division between positivistic and qualitative research. Positivist research assumes that there is an objective truth about the research subject/s which exists outside cultural influences, and which it is the job of the objective researcher to discover by means of scientific experimentation. By contrast, Denzin and Lincoln in *Handbook of Qualitative Research* explain that qualitative research ‘stress[es] the socially constructed nature of reality; the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry’ (2000:8)

For my study a qualitative approach was the only one I could imagine. Like many researchers my methodological choices were underpinned by my feminist principles. I was concerned with who controlled and directed the research process, and where I as researcher should position myself in relation to whom and what I was researching. I considered any research method which perpetuated a power imbalance between myself and my subjects, and the myth of the totally objective researcher, to be deeply flawed.

Much of the hermeneutics of feminist social research methods has been concerned with the ongoing attempt to identify and meet ethical challenges to the researcher/subject relationship, and to create a methodology/s which will yield more valuable data than what Esther Madriz disdains as ‘the positivistic legacy of reliance on numbers as the most accepted way to measure social reality’ (in Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:838). Madriz is

critical of those postcolonial research practices which exploit inequalities between researcher and subject, and which have especially disadvantaged women of colour, non-English speaking people and those with minimal educations (see, for example, Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Shohat 1992; Ang 1995; Chow 1994).

Importantly, Joshua Gamson in *Sexualities, Queer Theory and Qualitative Research* draws parallels between the history of social research on other minorities and research into sexualities, arguing that it [the history] ‘has elements familiar from the histories of women’s studies, ethnic studies, and the like; it is a history intertwined with the politics of social movements, wary of the ways “science” has been used against the marginalized, and particularly comfortable with the strategies of qualitative research’ (in Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:347). While it is true that the women who participated in my study are all white, mostly middle-class, articulate women, they could be seen as members of this other group, marginalized and rendered invisible because of their sexuality.

Qualitative research is responsive to the development of theories of social constructionism within lesbian and gay studies. Gamson points out that ‘lesbian and gay scholars criticized positivist approaches for mistaking the social order of sexuality for a natural one’ (ibid:352) and he compares the postmodern, post-queer deconstruction of sexual subjectivity with the underlying assumptions in qualitative research, referring to ‘an always shifting centre’ (citing Lincoln and Denzin, ibid:575). I take this up in Chapter 2 in discussions of queer and the changing social climate.

Positivist research has traditionally sought certainties regarding the subject/s from which generalities could be inferred. This has led some researchers to ignore the range of sexualities, not to mention attitudes and behaviours, included under the homosexual umbrella. I discovered very quickly that generalizing about my subjects on the basis of their sexuality and sexual history was a mistake. Except for the basic criteria which made the women suitable for participation in this study, there was no identifiable overarching sense of identity or politics among them. To some extent this diversity came as a surprise to me, but I was determined to acknowledge it. At the same time, I wanted to stress my

commonality, where it existed, with my subjects. Too often in the past studies have been undertaken by a heterosexual researcher who has positioned her/himself as the 'other' in relation to homosexual subjects. This made it easier for the homosexual subjects to be pathologised. I intended that by using the qualitative method of the researcher who identified with her subjects I would, as Gamson puts it, allow for 'visibility, cultural challenge and self-determination' of the subjects (ibid:348).

The desire on the part of feminists to conduct ethical social research is discussed by Virginia L. Olesen in her essay *Feminisms and Qualitative Research At and Into the Millennium* (in Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). She notes that the range and complexity of issues arising from feminist ethics has produced evolving, sometimes contradictory, views on acceptable methodologies. In addressing what was one of my primary concerns – the power imbalance between the researcher and her subjects -- she offers this insight:

The view, long held in feminist research, that researchers occupy a more powerful position than research participants because the researchers are the writers of the accounts has occasioned ethical worries. However, as feminist qualitative researchers have looked more closely at the relations between researchers and participants, the image of the powerless respondent has altered with the recognition that researchers' 'power' is often only partial (Ong, 1995), illusory (Visweswaran, 1997; M. A. Wolf, 1996), tenuous (D. L. Wolf, 1996b, p. 36) and confused with researcher responsibility (Bloom, 1998,p.35), even though the researchers may be more powerfully positioned when out of the field, because they will write the accounts (ibid:215).

I struggle with the contradictions in Oleson's idea later in this chapter. In the section on ethnography and the narrator's voice, I acknowledge the ultimately disproportionate power of the researcher, but in the section on focus Groups I describe how the participants were able to direct the agenda, disregarding questions which were of little interest or relevance to them and including other issues which had been omitted from the initial questionnaire. This was possible because I approached them as a participant

observer. I was, in a real sense, just one of the subjects of my own study, a curious kindred spirit rather than a distant authoritative researcher.

### ***Participant Observation***

**The oxymoron *participant observation* implies simultaneous emotional involvement and objective detachment. Ethnographers attempted to be both engaged participants and coolly, dispassionate observers of the lives of others.**

**Barbara Tedlock (in Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:465)**

In *Feminist Methods of Social Research*, Shulamit Reinharz discusses the approaches various researchers have taken in dealing with the tension between objectivity and subjectivity. To what extent should feminists reject the role of passive, invisible scientist in favour of the human researcher who acknowledges experience, feelings and ambivalence, all of which she uses to inform her work? Most feminists agree that scientific objectivity is an impossibility anyway, because every researcher has ‘a particular view from a particular standpoint’ (Reinharz,1992:228) whether they acknowledge it or not. And so long as the researcher is careful not to confuse her experience with that of her subjects, her identification with them can only enhance her understanding (ibid:261). According to Reinharz, some feminist researchers consider innovative methods counter-productive when it comes to convincing ‘the skeptics’, (ibid:239). But I share Reinharz’s conviction that rigorous research and subjectivity are not mutually exclusive.

The term ‘participant observer’ was first used by William Foote Whyte in his 1943 study *Street Corner Society* in which he investigated an Italian-American neighbourhood from the inside, by moving into the neighbourhood and participating in life there with his neighbours. Vidich and Lyman, in their essay *Qualitative Methods: Their History in*

*Sociology and Anthropology* explain, 'Whyte presents his data from the perspective of his relationships with his subjects. That is, Whyte is as much a researcher as he is a subject in his own book' (in Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:51).

I chose to position myself in a type of participant observer role for this study. Whereas Whyte's role required him to join and adopt a new (for him) identity of commonality with a pre-existing homogeneous population, mine allowed me to work with the facts that (a) I *already* shared with my subjects many of the things I wanted to investigate about them, and (b) though they came together in groups for the purposes of my research, they were not in any other sense an established unit. Though some women did feel that their sexual identity made them part of a lesbian community, this was certainly not the opinion of all the women, nor was it the basis on which I approached them as potential participants for the study.

In this project my role as participant observer acknowledged the fact that I had in common with the other women some experience which was relevant to the project and which I would reveal to them in the course of our interactions. It also meant that I had the advantage of insight based on personal experience, and some credibility with the other participants. Of course, this raises one of the inevitable difficulties of the participant observer. Precisely *because* I had some vital experiences in common with the other women, it was tempting for me to believe, in the early days at least, that my experience was representative of everyone else's. The researcher in me may have been eager for diversity, but the new lesbian in me was looking for affirmation. It was sometimes very challenging to realize that my story was not the same as each of my participants' stories, and that some point I had hoped to make and have reinforced through the focus groups was in fact only true or of interest to me.

I did participate fully in every focus group and interview, attempting to balance as far as possible my status as another woman with a story to tell and an observer and recorder of the collective process. The other participants were always insistent that I contribute my experience to the discussion. Obviously this involved a lot of repetition in the recording

and transcription, but I hope it has not resulted in a disproportionate contribution from me in the finished accounts. Also, about halfway through researching the project, at a suggestion from my supervisor I responded in writing to the questionnaire I had devised for the other women. I actually found the experience quite confronting, and valuable insofar as it gave me further insight into exactly how much I was asking of the others.

### *Ethnography and Reflexivity*

**At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the narrative turn has been taken. Many have learned how to write differently, including how to locate themselves in their texts.**

**Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2000:3)**

Rather than employing one methodology, qualitative research uses different, and often multiple, practices for gathering knowledge depending on the particular discipline and the research context. I chose an ethnographic approach to the research. Ethnography, a methodology traditionally associated with anthropological investigations where it described the cultures of different peoples, has more recently been used in the other social sciences and cultural studies. It

combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations and representations of human lives...It is located between the interiority of autobiography and the exteriority of cultural analysis (Tedlock, 2000:455).

As Denzin and Lincoln state in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 'Objective reality can never be captured' (2000:5). Therefore one of the most important methods within ethnography is reflexivity, a social science method which takes account of the presence of the researcher. It is the attempt to acknowledge the impact of a particular researcher on

what is being researched. Reflexivity locates the position, or perspective, of the researcher in relation to the research, acknowledging what Donna Haraway calls 'views from somewhere' rather than 'the view from above' (cited by George Marcus, 1998:200). Reflexivity takes into account the researcher's background and biases as well as her personal attributes. For example, because I have in common with my subjects the central criteria for inclusion in the project, I have chosen to answer the same questions I asked them. Because I am a feminist I have not only chosen an interview method which attempts to share control of the process amongst myself and my subjects rather than in a hierarchical way, but I have 'located' myself as honestly as possible within the text and analysed my data from a feminist perspective. Because I am a literary writer I have brought to the text certain preferences regarding language and storytelling, and have included a number of my poems.

The researcher as writer is a topic in Altheide and Johnson's discussion of ethnographic research (in Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). They argue that ethnographies become narratives **that observe the conventions of storytelling:**

**The problem, then, is that if a different style or genre is selected in giving an ethnographic account, we have a different view or story presented' (ibid:486, quoting Snow and Morrell, 1993:8).**

I have nominated my role in this project as that of participant observer, and the term itself suggests a degree of ambiguity inherent in this type of investigation. But there is *another* vantage point, that of the professional writer, from which I view, understand and act upon what I am researching. I am the narrator of a vast, complicated story, and as narrator I have coloured the story I am telling. I have chosen a tone of voice, calculated my stylistic distance from my subjects as well as my imagined reader/readers, decided which data to present, the order and context in which to present it, and I determined the cast of characters.

With this degree of inevitable subjective control in my hands, it became crucial for me as

a feminist researcher to use a methodology which would balance to some extent the level of influence between myself and my subjects and result in a richer body of data. I chose to work with women in focus groups.

### ***Focus Groups***

Esther Madriz, in her essay *Focus Groups in Feminist Research* comments, 'Interestingly, very few books dealing with feminist research methods have included discussions on the use of focus groups' (2000:842, ref. Wilkinson, 1998) although a type of focus group was actually used as early as the 1920s. Though slow to gain acceptance, since the late 1980s 'there has been a renewed interest in promoting the use of group interviews as a recognized social science research method' (ibid:837, citing Krueger, 1994). Madriz believes that focus groups have the advantage over interviews because 'they allow the researcher to witness one of the most important processes for the social sciences – social 'interaction' among participants (ibid:841). These 'horizontal interactions' rather than 'vertical interactions' mean that issues of power relations, if they exist, are among group members rather than between researcher and interviewees. Also, because the focus is on the group rather than the individual, responses tend to be more spontaneous, and involvement and participation in discussion is made easier. Madriz argues that the resulting data is of a higher quality than would be the case with traditional research methods, which reflect the researcher's biases and therefore determine the sorts of questions asked and the choices given participants. 'Those methods force upon participants an agenda that is not their own but the researcher's' (2000:838, citing Maynard and Purvis, 1994).

Marxist feminist researcher Frigga Haug, in *Female Sexualization* supports this view of the value of working in groups because it offers a collective approach to looking for what has been left out of each participant's narrative, and more opportunities for linkages of ideas and issues, which in turn create new questions. In describing her group's method of working she says, 'All the women involved made some sort of intervention into, or

participated in writing, all the texts we produced; it allowed us also to bring together a vast range of ideas in our discussions' (1987:31).

In 1990 I began work on a book titled *Talking Up a Storm*, about a group of women who had been members of a feminist consciousness-raising group in the 1970s. I had never heard of focus groups at that stage, but I knew the only method that would give me the data I was looking for was one in which the women I researched talked primarily to each other instead of to me. In that piece of research, the spontaneity, shared power, and interaction when the women met to have their conversations recorded by me were very reminiscent of their original consciousness-raising sessions. The advantages outweighed the difficulties this method presented. In fact, many of the difficulties could be better seen as challenges. For example, as far as setting an agenda was concerned, the women ended up determining what was important to have documented, and in keeping with Madriz's findings, sometimes that agenda included things I had either not considered important, or about which I had feelings and opinions that contradicted theirs, or about which I had not even been aware.

More than a decade later, I decided to work within this group structure again, knowing that there are some risks attached. As Madriz points out, a researcher should avoid using focus groups where the participants might not feel comfortable with, or have serious hostilities toward, each other. She also says, 'in a situation where a researcher needs participants to share very intimate details about their lives, a focus group would not be the most appropriate technique (2000:848). However, because of my experience I had strategies in place for dealing with this problem. Because of the very personal nature of the research topic, and the likelihood that intimate details of the women's lives would be discussed in front of strangers, I prepared them by sending them the questionnaire in advance, together with an explanation of how focus groups differed from interviews, so they understood before they agreed to attend a session what they would be expected to talk about and to whom. As far as this project is concerned, there is no noticeable difference between the degree of participant candor in the focus groups and in the one-on-one interviews. There were however several participants who merely alluded to some

intimate aspect of their lives in the focus group but discussed it in detail in a follow up interview. These discussions are in Chapter 2 and deal with bisexuality, butch/femme and sadomasochism.

### ***Gathering Data for this Study***

Most contact with participants was in the form of focus groups consisting of between three and seven women. We met at my house over lunch, except for one group which met at one of the participant's homes, to discuss in depth their experience of the topic area. I was concerned that the environment for our sessions be as conducive as possible to non-intimidating, comfortable communication, and chose this domestic setting because talking around the kitchen table is an activity many women easily recognize from other parts of their lives. Even the shared act of setting the table seemed to work as an icebreaker. Madriz talks about the benefits of 'using the participants' familiar spaces [to further diffuse] the power of the researcher, decreasing the possibilities of "Otherisation" (2000:841). But in this study the majority of participants did not have a meeting place in *common*; in fact they were strangers not only to me but to each other. Also, I had had the experience in gathering data for *Talking Up a Storm* of participants actually feeling less inhibited in talking about their lives *away* from their own homes, especially if they lived with other people, as long as the setting was informal and generically familiar. However, twice I met with couples in their own homes at their request. And on three occasions I met participants in an initial one-on-one interview, and conducted several individual follow-up interviews with focus group members for the purposes of clarification or expansion.

As noted earlier, the success of the focus group relies on the interaction between members as well as with the researcher. Therefore, from the first group meeting I was grateful for, and excited by, how readily the women were willing to share their stories and thoughts on what they had experienced. These sessions were characterized by trust, candor, animation, lively disagreements and good humour. The semi-structured meetings

used the original questionnaire as a guide, but allowed for conversational departures into new, relevant areas. I set up the tape recorder in the middle of the table and got everyone to introduce themselves. Each focus group then established its own guidelines before beginning discussion. These addressed issues of confidentiality, censorship, appropriate ways to respond to each other, duration of meetings and other concerns participants had about procedure (eg. possible marginalizing of a member because of her views).

The women all knew generally what ground the session would cover because I had requested them to read the questionnaire prior to our meeting, and think about their answers and whether they would like to add anything I had omitted. None of the groups took the exact route I had plotted in advance, but as I had anticipated, chose a trajectory of their own. Nevertheless we did address all the issues I had nominated, plus whatever else the women added to the agenda. In the Conclusion, I elaborate on the revelations which resulted from this process.

Although I preferred the focus group model, it was not always possible to use it. When I had an opportunity to interview someone on a one-to-one basis I took it if I felt the interviewee might have a significant contribution to make to the research data. Of the three women I interviewed on their own, two had been living publicly as lesbians for years and were very much at ease talking about their transitions. The third woman, Rene, was recently out, isolated in terms of a lesbian community, and unaccustomed to talking about her experience. I felt of all the participants she might be most at risk of being influenced by my agenda in a one-to-one interview, but it was not possible to get her story any other way. So that she would feel more at ease, I let her decide where she would meet me, and she preferred her own home.

I had intended to arrange follow-up sessions, and I did this with the first focus group, but in the event, time restrictions (mine and the participants') ruled it out for other groups. My preference was for a method which allowed for two-way communication, with a feedback system. I wanted to avoid the problem existing in both the Cassingham and O'Neil (1993), and the Abbott and Farmer (1995) studies, where a concern is touched on

by a subject, but not explored further by the researchers. Instead of recalling groups, I contacted a participant if I felt anything she had said on tape required clarification or expansion.

The duration of a session varied from ninety minutes to more than three hours, depending on the number of participants, their level of engagement and their volubility. Approximately one third of the thesis comes from interview data gathered in both the one-on-one interviews and the small focus groups.

### ***The Participants***

Participants in this project were women whose lives had at some point been in intense transition as a result of a mid-life change from being heterosexual to being lesbian. Although they were selected on the basis of a commonality of position, there were nevertheless huge differences between them. I had no wish to create a hierarchal structure by grading them according to their differences. I wanted the women who took part in the study to have widely varying experiences of lesbianism, and to have reached different conclusions about those experiences depending on such individual factors as age, personality, history, lifestyle, career, values and beliefs, context, reaction from others, whether or not they are currently in a relationship, and the extent to which their relationship(s) with women have been sexually, emotionally and psychologically satisfying. I stressed, and each of the group members agreed, that no member would be ostracized for expressing an opinion contrary to the views of the majority. While this worked, I believe, in most circumstances, there were some exceptions which I discuss in Chapter 2 in the section on marginalized groups within the lesbian community.

The women who contributed to the project fell into a number of categories, including:

- Women for whom attraction to another woman/women in mid life came as a surprise;
- Women who feel they are finally living in accord with their true sexual identity;

- Women who had previously been attracted to other women but had not until now had a relationship with one;
- Previously straight women who had always seen themselves as having the potential for a lesbian relationship for reasons of politics, social environment, generally liberal attitudes toward exploring sexuality, etc.
- Women who in mid-life acknowledge a significant lesbian relationship, but who have previously had lesbian encounters while identifying, both publicly and to themselves, as heterosexual;
- Women who have (or had) a significant sexual relationship with a particular woman in mid-life but who feel they are, in general, as likely to be attracted to men as to women;
- Women who had a significant relationship with another woman for the first and only time in mid-life but who now view that as an aberration rather than a change in their heterosexual identity.

I confined eligibility for participation in the study to women who had previously been in long term relationships with men and who had identified themselves at that time as heterosexual. They needed to have been out as a lesbian for at least two years prior to the interviews, and to have been over thirty-five when they first publicly acknowledged their lesbianism. (Thirty-five is the age given by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as the mid-life point for women.) It was also essential that the participants regard their relationship with another woman/women as significant because of its impact on their identity and lifestyle.

Sixteen of the twenty two other participants were unknown to me prior to their attendance at focus group sessions or interviews. In several cases my initial approach to a prospective subject was by a letter, in which I introduced myself and my project, and explained that I had been given her name by a mutual friend. But usually, out of respect for their privacy, I preferred the women who were referred to me to hear about the project first from our mutual friend, and then to contact me if they were interested in getting more information. Once they contacted me I posted them an information package,

including a description of the project and a preliminary questionnaire on the broad areas of Self, Partners, Family and Friends, and The Community. I pointed out that this was only a starting point, and that I was happy to discuss anything they felt was important, whether or not it arose from my questions. I said that where possible I would be organizing to meet participants in focus group settings, and explained how and why those differed from one-on-one interviews.

Appendix I gives each woman's age in the year 2000, her age at the time of coming out, the year in which she came out, the duration of her most significant heterosexual relationship/s and the number of children she has. The following are brief descriptions of each of the participants, altered slightly to guard their privacy. The twenty three women including myself ranged in age at the time of the interviews between forty-five and seventy years.

1. MARNIE is in her mid forties, attractive in a soft butch jeans and t-shirt way. She's a former nursing sister who returned to tertiary education and now works in the Welfare area. Formerly married with a teenaged son, she has been in a committed, non-live-in relationship for several years. Marnie still finds men attractive, and used to call herself bisexual, but has grown into calling herself a lesbian over the years.
2. BECKY is a teacher, in her mid-forties. She is softly-spoken, pretty in a 'traditionally' feminine way, and was previously in a twenty-year marriage to the father of her four children. Her first relationship with another woman, which has lasted for over ten years, came after a very messy breakup with her husband. She is certain she will never have another relationship with a man. Becky is still not out to her parents, or at her work as a primary school teacher. Becky and her partner, who is also a mother, do not mingle much with other lesbians.
3. DENISE is in her early fifties but looks younger. She is very aware of, and enjoys, her image as an attractive, sexy, feminine-looking in-your-face dyke. She

- left a twenty-five year marriage and two teenaged sons for another woman when she was in her mid forties, but currently prefers casual serial relationships to monogamy. She is tertiary educated and works in the welfare sector.
4. SANDRA works on the gay and lesbian switchboard and as a counselor. She is in her mid fifties, and had her first relationship with another woman when she was in her mid thirties. She feels most comfortable in the role of rakish ‘lipstick butch’ attracted to femme women, and tends to see all lesbian relationships from a butch/femme perspective. She has been a gay activist for much of this time, and maintains a good relationship with the father of her three grown children, who came out as a gay man at the same time she came out.
  5. FLEUR is in her late forties, was married for seventeen years and has three children. She has been out as a lesbian for about eight years. She is an artist and also works in the education sector. Fleur is colorful, outspoken and highly individual. She has been in a relationship for several years, but is ambivalent about monogamy. She is part of the lesbian leather (S & M) community.
  6. NATALIE is fifty, was married for over twenty years, and has two children from whom she has been estranged since her choice to live as a lesbian about seven years ago. She comes from very small conservative country town. She is a university graduate and an artist who works in a variety of other jobs in order to earn a living. She is very feminine in appearance, and is in a relationship with a very butch-looking woman who attracts a great deal of attention in public. This, and the fact that her mother is not reconciled to her lifestyle, make it difficult for Natalie to go home to her small town.
  7. ROSE is nearly fifty. She is a quietly spoken woman who came from the country, where she was married for twenty years and had three children. She has been out for about ten years and owns a business with partner Laura. For Rose, becoming a

- lesbian was a wonderful shift, and she found the lesbian community in Melbourne very supportive after her restrictive country town.
8. LAURA is nearly fifty and has two daughters. She came out about six years ago, when she moved from the country to Melbourne. Laura, whose partner in life and business is Rose, is an amusing and earthy raconteur. She has absolutely no regrets about her current lifestyle although she has experienced some homophobic reactions from strangers.
  9. SUSAN is in her early forties and was formerly married to a gay man with whom she had three children. She has a university education and works as a consultant. She is quiet, intelligent and given to introspection about her transition to lesbianism. She considers herself part of queer community.
  10. CYNTHIA is a fifty-year-old academic. She comes from a large close-knit family and was previously married but has no children. She has a strong decisive personality, is articulate, warm and presents as an interesting mixture of the cynic and the romantic. She is in a highly sexually and intellectually charged relationship with a woman whom she sees as her soul mate.
  11. ELISABETH is a softly feminine-looking and highly intelligent sixty year old. In her late fifties she left a traditional twenty-five year marriage to be with another woman, who greatly challenged Elizabeth's concept of herself in a relationship. She is very happy with both the relationship and herself today. She is a business woman with grown children.
  12. JENNIFER came out nine years ago, at age forty-eight, as the result of a passionate and unexpected relationship with another woman. She is a tertiary educated professional, warm, articulate and on first meeting appears rather conservative. She has two grown children to whom she is very close, and is not currently in a relationship.

13. TANIA is in her mid-fifties, has her own successful business and is very active in international women's issues. She's a staunch lesbian feminist who presents as very feminine, with a bias towards lots of chiffon and crepe. She had her first relationship with woman in her mid-30s and says she 'chose' to be a lesbian as a political act. She comes across as very earnest and politically passionate.
14. DIANNE is in her late fifties. Although for many years all her friendships had been with feminists, mostly lesbians, she didn't have her first lesbian relationship until she was forty-eight, when she renounced heterosexuality after discovering that her husband had sexually abused her daughters. She works in the public service, and is wryly funny.
15. VALERIE is sixty-seven. She was born in Eastern Europe, was married for twenty-two years and has children, but her earliest passion was for a girl. She began identifying as a lesbian in the late sixties, although she was not at the time in a relationship with a woman, but was involved with Women's Liberation. Valerie is a garrulous, sophisticated extrovert who works as a counselor.
16. BRENDA is in her sixties. She is a public servant who works in women's affairs. She was married twice, the second time quite happily for seventeen years, but has had passionate non-physical relationships with girls since adolescence. Brenda was very active in Women's Liberation in the seventies. She is candid, friendly and appears serene.
17. MEL is in her early sixties, a retired public servant who continues to be involved with various women's organizations. She was married for twenty-nine years and has grown children. She sees herself as the product of an older generation and believes that has complicated some aspects of her adjustment to lesbian life. Mel

- has been in a relationship with a much younger woman for about ten years. She doesn't like to use labels, preferring 'just us.'
18. NORA is a business-woman in her forties who was married for a very short time. She had been attracted to women since adolescence but wanted a child. However, she decided at thirty-five not to worry about children any more, especially since she wanted the relationship she has with an older woman who already had grown children and was not interested in any more. Nora is very funny, frank, talkative and comfortable with herself.
  19. RENE is a recently widowed mother of two grown children. She is in her mid-fifties, and works as a medical scientist. She is very forthcoming and down to earth, but dealing with a few large and current issues, such as the sudden death of her husband (from whom she was separated at the time), her son's conflicted feelings about her new life as a lesbian, and a relationship she is having with a married, self-confessed heterosexual woman who was formerly her best friend. She says she has always looked very butch, and most people were not surprised when she came out as gay. She doesn't like the word lesbian.
  20. JANE is a striking woman in her mid-fifties, a retired teacher who had her first lesbian relationship at the age of forty. Up until that point she had never been aware of being attracted to other women, and admits to initially struggling with a degree of internalized homophobia. Jane has been in a committed relationship for seven years, but still finds men very attractive and cannot rule out the possibility of a future relationship with a man if she broke up with her current partner. She considers herself bisexual, but is dismissive of labels.
  21. ANNE is a very attractive woman of fifty who describes herself prior to her first lesbian relationship as 'rampantly heterosexual'. She is intelligent, involved in her local community and highly regarded in her career. She was married for ten years

before leaving her husband to pursue a passionate affair with a long-term lesbian. This lasted ten years. She is currently in the early stages of another relationship.

22. VIRGINIA is a business-woman in her mid fifties, an extrovert with a deeply reflective side. She was a member of a feminist consciousness-raising group in the 1970s but otherwise lived a fairly conventional heterosexual life, though she has always considered her sexuality very fluid. She has two grown children. She began her first public relationship with another woman at fifty while she was married to her second husband of nearly twenty years, for whom she still has great affection.

23. MARGOT is in her fifties, and was politicized back in the 1970s as a heterosexual mother trying to contribute to the women's liberation movement. Today she works in the public sector and has a confident, comfortable, slightly ironic manner not uncommon in many of the women her age. She is still very interested in feminist politics but fears feminism has lost its revolutionary spirit.

### ***Editing Tape-recorded Data and Organising the Text***

David Silverman, in his essay *Analyzing Talk and Text*, discusses the advantages of tape-recording interviews. He notes the value of audible non-verbal but nevertheless telling elements on tape-recordings, such as 'pauses, overlaps, and inhalations' (2000:829). My experience some years ago in reading two versions of transcriptions of taped sessions for *Talking Up a Storm* confirmed this. The first version omitted everything but verbal communication. It was true to the letter of the conversations but profoundly missing the spirit. Participants tended to sound like they were delivering speeches in a vacuum rather than struggling with memory, emotion, expression and the responses of other participants. The second transcription, an edited version of which I ended up using, included or referred to everything that was audible on the tapes, all the false starts, the hesitations, even the interruptions by others. Reading this convinced me that non-verbal

elements contain indispensable information about what really happened in a focus group or interview.

For *Dancing Across Borders* I did delete some repetitions when I transcribed the tapes, but always left in pauses and hesitations where I felt they indicated a degree of thoughtfulness or difficulty in answering a question. Transcribed conversations are often punctuated with notes about laughter or murmurs of agreement from the listening participants, or interruptions. Sometimes these notes were included in the final text to make sure I captured the mood of the session. I felt it was important, when the words didn't seem to be enough, that I indicate the tone of voice and/or the responses the statements provoked in the rest of the group.

Silverman, in stressing the importance of this kind of contextual consideration, refers to Sacks (1992b) who lists these other advantages of tape-recording proceedings:

- Tapes give the actual sequence, recording what preceded and what followed particular comments, providing a context.
- The researcher cannot invent material, either deliberately or through faulty memory or field notes.
- Tapes provide a public record available to others, and they can be replayed in order to better, or differently, analyse them.
- Subsequent researchers can inspect tapes and have access to the entire conversation rather than being limited to the first researcher's chosen extract. This can lead to new sentence extracts or new analyses of the same sentences.

In *Talking Up a Storm* I transcribed entire conversations and presented them as a running dialogue. But in that study I was working with the same women in every group so there was less likelihood of repeated subject matter in subsequent sessions. In *this* study I needed a different approach to organizing the text. Because all sessions covered more or less the same subject ground from the perspective of different women, I extracted and clustered quotations around a stated issue or theme.

I sometimes also found it necessary or desirable to edit (in the final text only) a particular quote of an individual speaker, either because her whole comment was not directly related to the topic we were discussing, or because it threatened her anonymity. At other times I conflated two quotations from the same woman when they seemed to belong together thematically, and when one flowed logically on from the other. I have been careful at all times not to extract any part from a larger quotation when to do so would distort its intended meaning as I understood it. However, it is possible that my own biases and limitations may have caused me to analyse a participant's comments in a way that she hadn't intended, or in a way that differs from alternative interpretations by other researchers. Therefore the complete set of unedited tapes exists as a primary resource.

### ***Privacy and Confidentiality***

Because of the personal, and sometimes highly sensitive nature of the data recorded, I needed to reassure participants that their privacy would be protected. They were invited to choose their own pseudonyms, but they unanimously agreed in all groups to leave this to me. I explained that I would not only change names, but take whatever additional measures I felt were necessary to guard their anonymity. I experimented with various ways of attributing their quotes while trying to ensure their anonymity. These included dispensing with attributions altogether, but this had an oddly disembodied effect, and also might have left me vulnerable to questions about the validity of the quotes. At one stage I gave each contributor a number - a method I had observed in other texts featuring personal accounts. However this seemed both impersonal and pointlessly complicated, so I finally settled for using the original pseudonyms and editing out any material that might identify the woman.

### ***Experimental Approaches to Writing the Text***

Quoting from the women's personal accounts was relatively easy since I was only required to arrange their words, not to choose them. It was far more difficult to decide on an appropriate style for my exegesis. I had been concerned from the beginning about the language I would need to use in this text. Obviously I wanted to produce a scholarly work, but as a participant observer, I did not want to hide behind the impersonal voice of the researcher. The following extract addresses the problem. It is from Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner's experimental contribution to Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2000:734):

Bochner: 'It's as if they're written from nowhere by nobody. The conventions militate against personal and passionate writing. These books are filled with dry, distant, abstract, propositional essays.'

Ellis: 'That's called academic writing, darling.'

By using the innovation of personal dialogue and humour rather than the more typical essay form to discuss the problem, Ellis and Bochner are actually taking a serious swipe at the shortcomings of conventional academic writing and the distant passive voice. As a creative writer who thinks ultimately of the beauty of language and its ability to communicate, I was apprehensive about having to adopt the type of academic voice which, as a reader, I felt alienated by. I was interested in exploring the notion, which exists for poetry, that in the best writing there is a relationship between the complexity of the idea and the simplicity of its expression.

I tried to solve the problem by giving myself multiple voices. I used one voice for scholarly discussion and another voice when I added my comments to focus group quotations. I included poems which allowed me to shift from the other scholarly or personal voices in order to make a more abstracted, often ironic contribution. And finally I used journal extracts in which I reflected on the research process as I went along. I believe this device enabled me to declare biases, doubts and realizations as they were revealed to me. It was with this voice that I was most able to keep track of my location as researcher.

### *Memory and Narrative*

Another major issue facing the feminist researcher is the lack of objective validity in the remembered experiences of her research subjects. Frigga Haug, who has worked extensively with groups relying on their memories, and champions the remembered experience of the individual as a valuable contribution to the understanding of collective experience, discusses the cynicism directed at this type of research. She states,

It is commonly argued that the lack of objective validity in subjective experience arises from an individual propensity to twist and turn, reinterpret and falsify, forget and repress events, pursuing what is in fact no more than an ideological construction of individuality, giving oneself an identity for the present to which the contents of the past are subordinated (1987:40).

To some extent this was a reality I had to deal with, not only (I am assuming) in the process of gathering information from the participants, but most definitely in relating my own experience. This is not surprising, given the tendency of all people to narrativise their lives using the same devices a writer might use in telling a fictional story. As Liz Stanley says in *On Feminism, Cultural Politics and Post/Modern Selves*,

We expect our and other people's lives to have troughs and peaks, to have 'meaning', to have major and minor characters, heroes and villains, to be experienced as linear and progressive, and for chronology to provide the most important means of understanding them, all of which are characteristics of fiction (1992:14).

Celia Kitzinger is one researcher who is not concerned with issues of validity and reliability. Specifically with regard to labeling, she characterises 'lesbian identity'

exclusively by the set of meanings a woman uses when she describes herself as a 'lesbian', although the label may mean different things to different women. My project, which may include women who would not call themselves lesbian, is also concerned with how women interpret their own actions and experiences.

**Journal Entry, 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2001**

*I realize that valuable information is lost if people don't own up to the messiness of their lives. Life is messy. The whole underlying premise in this work is that life is messy, and that it is less productive to think in terms of absolutes and binary oppositions, than in terms of fluidity and continuums...and circuitous routes, and even juggling and uncertainty. I remember Roland Barthes said something somewhere about traditional narrative being basically reactionary. It lets people kid themselves that life is neat and linear and has resolution.*

In the end it was the relationship between social and creative research that determined the approach I took in writing the thesis. I used the eclectic methodology I needed, a postmodern strategy legitimated by George Marcus in *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin*. Marcus describes what he calls 'messy texts', which

are messy because they insist on their own open-endedness, incompleteness, and uncertainty about how to draw a text/analysis to a close. Such open-endedness often marks a concern with an ethics of dialogue and partial knowledge, a sense that a work is incomplete without critical, and differently positioned, responses to it by its (ideally) varied readers.

George Marcus (1998: 189)

Donna Haraway in her book *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1998, cited by George Marcus 1998:200) talks about the feminist ideal of a sort of compromise between the impossibility of total

objectivity and the proclaimed subjectivity of many reflexive ethnographies. Once I accepted this impossibility, I was then freed up to explore honestly the feat of straddling this boundary between observer and subject.

*Dancing Across Borders*

## ***Chapter Two***

### **DANCING INTO THE ARMS OF THE WORLD: CULTURE, HISTORY, DISCOURSE**

#### ***What Do You Call This One?***

*Here she comes, Contestant No. 1  
and you have to hand it to her,  
she's got balls.  
But that costume won't win her any points.  
And the routine's nothing but pastiche.  
Complex, yes, but a mongrel of a dance.  
Not popular with the judges.*

*There seems to be a little group  
of supporters up the back.  
It's helping her confidence.  
Here she's attempting a tricky step.  
Risky, very risky.  
One false move and*

*it's just a fallback position,*

*but no, she's done it!*

*A perfectly executed Foot in Both Camps.*

*Makes it look natural as breathing.*

*That balance is going to help her score.*

*Folks, we're witnessing something different.*

*The fans up the back are going wild.*

*The rest of the audience is clearly intrigued*

*but these judges may take some convincing.*

\*

**'Identity' is probably one of the most naturalized cultural categories each of us inhabits: one always thinks of one's *self* as existing outside all representational frames, and as somehow marking a point of undeniable realness.**

**Annamarie Jagose (1996:78)**

In the wake of postmodernism and queer theory's blurring and transgressing of boundaries, notions of what constitutes identity, gender, sexuality, community and culture have all undergone reassessment. This chapter looks at how a woman's experience may be shaped by new ways of conceptualizing these factors. It explores the relationship between an individual's sense of self, the community of interest she identifies with, and the wider culture of which she and her community are a part. In particular it focuses on the importance to the women in my study of living through their sexual transition at this precise moment in Western history.

When I first conceived of this study, I was coming at the topic from the standpoint of someone who believed (perhaps paradoxically in hindsight) that first, an individual's 'identity' was unassailable because of what Jagose calls its 'undeniable realness', and

second, that identity was able to be challenged to the point of crisis. I assumed sexual preference and behaviour were such important determinants in overall identity that an individual's first expression of a hitherto unexpressed type of sexuality would impact heavily on her sense of who she was. But the women in this study, depending to some extent on their ages and on when they came out, have witnessed an unprecedented degree of socially acceptable, or at least visible, sexual diversity. They have also seen many old certainties challenged. Much that they once took for granted as natural and fixed about the human condition they now know to be constructed, flexible and shifting.

Some of the women in this study place a great deal of significance, for reasons which are detailed in the next chapter, on the label 'lesbian'. For this group the word sums up much of what they consider essential about themselves. But I discovered that for some participants, identifying publicly as a woman who prefers another women for a partner is not the best way of telling the world who they really are. For them, the politics of identity which underpinned the gay liberation movement of the 1960s are no longer so important. When asked to name another (non-sexual) label that was more important to them as a marker of identity, several women said they thought of themselves first of all as parents, or as women who worked and thought in certain ways that had nothing to do with their sexuality.

MARNIE: We're more likely now to identify with heterosexual parents than other lesbians who are not parents. Our concerns are carpools, and homework.

ELISABETH: Once it would have been Parent...that was important. But now, I'd say a professional.

CYNTHIA: A professional... I've never until much later even identified myself as a woman, because I was my father's helpmate on the farm, and he treated me as just a person.

JANE: I'd like to be known as an artist. I'd like to be labeled creative. Yeah, creative would suit me very nicely. And clever. And observant. And kind and generous and things like that. Not a political identity. And if I had a political identity it would be Green. It might be feminist, but I don't see the need to have a political identity as a lesbian quite frankly.

NATALIE: Happily married. (laughter)

These sorts of comments suggest a very different social and political climate at the turn of the century, marked by a more relaxed attitude toward personal sexuality. They also have profound implications for the concept of a community based on sexual orientation. In Chapter 3 the women discuss in some detail the sexual labels and locations they claim for themselves within the non-heterosexual world, and in Chapter 4 they specifically discuss their experience with a lesbian community or communities. But first I want to consider some changing attitudes toward and within the lesbian community/s.

### *Identity Politics and Community*

**For me, 'lesbian' no longer defines everything, including my affiliations and friendships. I think many of us maintain a GLBTI identity but also go where our other identities lead us. We dance between them and sometimes carry them complete.**

**Philomena Horsley (2002:2)**

Philomena Horsley, in a paper she presented at the Health in Difference 4 conference in Sydney in 2002, titled *State of the community: a critical diagnosis*, refers to the first such conference held in 1996. She reminds her audience that 'one paper by Robert Ball on "community" was presented. He critiqued the calls in the 1970s and 1980s for the gay

and lesbian community to present itself as “strong, homogenous and united” in its fight for human rights and equality, and he explored the sense of stolid sameness and reductionism that such a unitary concept held.’ Horsley then goes on to say that things have changed in the eight years since Ball’s critique of the stranglehold that identity politics had over the gay and lesbian community. She says, ‘We have moved enormously in our understandings of the communities – plural – which we inhabit. They are complex, multifaceted, multiple and fluid’ (2002:2).

In order to appreciate how important Horsley’s argument is, it is worth reviewing the significant shifts through the twentieth century until the present day in thinking about sexuality, identity, community and difference in its various forms, beginning with the legacy of worldwide social unrest in the 1960s, through to feminism in the 1970s, AIDS in the 1980s and queer theory in the 1990s.

Identity politics is a twentieth-century invention. Before that, the dominant western paradigm for understanding sexuality until the end of the nineteenth century was a religious/moral one. Homosexual behaviours were viewed as sinful and illegal, condemned by the Church and punished by the state. However, it was thought that fundamentally heterosexual men and women were simply indulging in these perverse behaviours, not that they were themselves perverts. There was until the late nineteenth century no notion of identity formulated around sexuality. This began to change when the movement of taxonomies, of which Freud was a part, desired to categorise the material and psychological world. This classification of people and their behaviour according to notions of biological determinism led to the identification of the homosexual male, as distinct from the male who simply chose to engage in homosexual acts. Jagose, in outlining the shift in thinking about homosexual behaviour and identity, quotes French historian Michel Foucault, who states in his influential *The History of Sexuality* (Volume 1, 1981:43), ‘The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species’ (cited by Jagose, 1996:11).

From that point on the debate has raged over whether the homosexual is born or made. Historically the two most influential and hotly contested theories about what determines sexual identity are encapsulated in the essentialist and constructionist positions. Essentialist theory regards sexual orientation as innate, objective and fixed, independent of culture and context, and therefore essentialists assume that the categories of sexual orientation are appropriate categories to apply to individuals (Kitzinger, 1987:140). Broadly speaking, essentialists believe that there is an identity called 'homosexual', and that individuals are born with that identity. Paradoxically, some of these same essentialists believe that heterosexuals are able to be, and are at risk of being, converted to homosexuality.

Constructionists on the other hand believe sexual identity is the effect of social conditioning, and that it cannot be understood outside the meanings it has in a specific culture. Kitzinger, in her 1987 essay *Social Constructionism: Implications for Gay and Lesbian Psychology*, states the constructionist position: 'Sex is not an instinctive force or biological drive, controlled by inner psychic forces or hormonal fluctuations, but rather a social construct, regulated by "sexual scripts"' (1987:140). Unlike drives, which are fixed essences destined to seek particular expression, 'scripts' can be highly variable and fluid, subject to constant revision and editing. The "scripts" Kitzinger refers to are those which feature in Gagnon's script theory, central to which 'was the refusal to privilege sexuality as a core aspect of the self'. Instead, Gagnon believed people acquire their sexuality in the same way they acquire other dimensions of their identity, unconsciously from their social environment (Gagnon, 1977).

Michel Foucault also takes the constructionist line, arguing that not only is homosexual identity a social construct but that heterosexual identity is as well; that far from being the normative state, of which homosexuality is a perversion, heterosexuality relies on an oppositional 'perverse' identity construction for its definition (Jagose, 1996). Adrienne Rich, in her germinal essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1978) discusses the ramifications of refusing to question the assumption of heterosexuality as the normal state rather than as a construct contributing to male domination and female

oppression. She says, 'Yet the failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system of racism is maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness (Rich, 1980:648).

Jagose (1996) 'maps' the direction taken by people attempting to define lesbian and gay identity throughout the twentieth century in Europe, Britain and the United States. Various manifestations of the homophile movement promoted homosexuality as congenital, pitiable, sometimes pathological and utterly harmless to the status quo. While it advocated rights for homosexuals, its stance was assimilationist and it avoided methods which might alienate the mainstream. Then on the 27<sup>th</sup> June, 1969 police raided The Stonewall Inn, a New York City gay and drag bar. In protest there followed a week of rioting, and this is often referred to in lesbian and gay mythology as the symbolic point at which homosexuality turned away from assimilationist policies to embrace gay identity as a political force. So dramatic was this unprecedented action and so far-reaching were its consequences that to this day, lesbians and gay men often describe their coming out as either pre- or post-Stonewall.

Stonewall occurred in the context of a worldwide culture of social protest which had begun in the sixties. Gay liberation became the new, outspoken and unapologetic voice of homosexual identities. The rationale behind identity politics is that political action is impossible without some unified identity, and from this point gay and lesbian political tactics included the marking out of homosexual communities which provided support, visibility, pride and political clout as a consequence of unity. 'What had once been a personal identity for gay men and lesbians became a collective identity, and the stigma of homosexuality as mental illness dissolved into the possibility of an open and proud minority status' (Kimmel and Sang, 1998:191). This was also an era of sexual revolution, when pleasure was being assessed apart from the function of reproduction. Homosexuality had a new place in this generally more liberal climate (Sitka, 2002:21).

### *Lesbians and Feminism*

The late sixties and early seventies were heady days for anyone with a political agenda. In his book *From Camp to Queer: Remaking the Australian Homosexual*, Robert Reynolds describes the prevailing utopian belief that gay liberation would lead the way to a new universal bisexuality, or 'the humansexual' (2002:77). Along with gay liberation, women's liberation was becoming a powerful force. It was as a result of the women's movement that lesbians and feminists came into contact with each other for the first time (Sang, 1991) though not always harmoniously. Many of us in this study were active in the women's movement, and our perspective on those days tends to be that of the heterosexual feminist, rather than the lesbian feminist, who often felt her place in the movement was at its margins. Though we were not unaware of the schism that was developing between the two groups, many of us still remembered that period in history as one of great optimism and solidarity. In discussing it, some women lamented the loss of that shared energy and focus in what they see as the politically lethargic climate of today.

TANIA: I'm sure you have to agree there is something fundamentally different about the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties for women, and for the lesbian community, from what there is now. I think it's diffuse, I think we've got caught up with queer politics, we've got caught into the AIDS stuff, we've got caught into our careers... I just don't think there's community.

VALERIE: We were actually planning the revolution...really down to tin tacks - who's prepared to go to prison. We did it like a job. We were ready. That was community. We were in this together, we went on protest marches. I sat in front of the tram and didn't budge, because that was the pro-abortion stuff. I mean, when you started putting your lives and your welfare on the line, that created

community. Now we're all comfortable...and we're lonely. We miss...the enthusiasm of the early years, that revolutionary spirit...I'm bored shitless, to tell you the truth.

Though few of the women in this study were lesbians at the time, many recall feeling that the sisterhood's opposition to the patriarchy took precedence over, and blurred to some extent, the boundary between heterosexual and lesbian women. Meanwhile, *within* the radical lesbian movement, Kitzinger (1987) states that what was happening for some women was the redefinition of 'the nature of sexual orientation from a psychological characteristic, to a political ideology.' So many lesbian feminists who had originally worked within gay liberation began to prefer aligning themselves with other women, even heterosexual women. In this spirit, Rich attempted to dissociate the lesbian from the male homosexual and emphasize instead the commonality of women. "I perceive the lesbian experience as being like motherhood, a profoundly *female* experience, with particular oppressions, meanings, and potentialities we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually stigmatized existences" (Rich, 1980:318-19 cited in Jagose, 1996:50). While most of us in this study consider ourselves feminists, many of us rejected the notion that shared oppression is enough to make all women feel connected with, and accepting of, each other. As one woman said:

MARNIE: It's like saying all Aboriginal people could live together because they're all Aborigines. You're talking about that essentialist idea that there's something that all lesbians have in common... And women should all be like each other ...well, please, there's no law ....

And Sandra added, 'You can be accused of not being lesbian enough.' Many of us agreed with her, having experienced discrimination from within the lesbian community, and feeling pressure to be a different kind of lesbian:

MARGOT: Ever since little boys weren't allowed in lesbian meetings, I've totally moved away from the lesbian community because I was so horrified. If we can't

even raise our children...well, they could all go and get stuffed as far as I was concerned.

The history of gay liberation is a history told largely in terms of the homosexual experience. While lip service was paid to 'gay liberation' as an umbrella term covering lesbians, in reality it often referred to the male homosexual and his political agenda. Therefore many feminist lesbians rejected both the terms 'gay' and 'homosexual' as further examples of male domination, and as shown in Chapter 2, this attitude persists for most of the women in this study. Part of the radical lesbian's preoccupation with nomenclature is her fear of disappearing if her lesbian identity is subsumed under the supposedly generic heading of 'homosexual'. Rich not only refused to identify with the homosexual label, experience and agenda, but she rejected the early gay liberationists' dream of the destruction of sex roles in a genderless society in which everyone accepted their bisexuality. However, this ideal has obvious links with later queer theory, and those participants in this study who rejected the labels of gay and homosexual were also those who expressed concern about queer.

As well as struggling for an identity separate from male homosexuals, and in spite of being united with heterosexual women against the patriarchy, radical lesbians continued to experience discrimination from the Women's Movement. By the late seventies a deep division had developed in the ranks between straight women and radical lesbian feminists who denounced heterosexual sex. Lesbianism was seen as a political imperative for some feminists and this stance did not include an examination of desire. For these women feminist sex was lesbian sex. Celia Kitzinger quotes the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group of 1981, which describes lesbianism as 'a necessary political choice, part of the tactics of our struggle, not a passport to paradise' (1998:116).

At the time some critics resisted this attempt to strip lesbianism of its erotic component. Still others argued that lesbian feminism's regulatory approach to sexual identity was just another version of the oppression meted out by patriarchy. Some of the women in my own study were very vocal about the standard-bearers who had accused them of not

living up to the normative expectations. For some this conflict goes back decades, and for others it is specifically related to their later lesbianism:

BECKY: What they're doing is perpetuating the stereotypical image that most heterosexuals have, which is odd. And they kind of actually believe all that shit so they put themselves down all the time, and put other women down. Lesbians who discriminate against other lesbians have kind of internalized this...not homophobia, but...it's like a kind of restriction, maintaining the oppression of what a lesbian should be.

MARGOT: Women's liberation for me – and I'm a child of the sixties and seventies - was about finding another road than power and control. And that's the thing that I find difficult...We went from one rigid structure to another rigid structure. From straight to lesbian...in a way. Like when I came out as a lesbian...I had lots of women's underwear, all sorts of things...and my partner made me throw them all out...and I thought, what is this all about. It was a very confusing time, and I felt for years and years and years oppressed again, by women! And it certainly didn't fit in with my feminist politics, that I'd spent years reading about and slowly changing my life, to match the personal and the political.

MARNIE: My sister [who is a lesbian too] discriminated against me on several occasions because I'd played the game of heterosexuality and then on top of that I had a child, which just makes the whole thing of being a lesbian even more farcical as far as she's concerned. And because of the partner I chose too... my sister has an enormous issue around class, and unless I'm married to a bull dyke it's not okay.

These comments reflect the backlash against what can be seen as a feminist regulatory model of lesbianism. At this point I want to look at other forms of oppression not considered in, yet sometimes fostered by, this regulatory model.

### *From Difference to Differences*

**The question is...what is at stake in maintaining the boundaries around female sameness that are, in the end, arbitrary (and by that I mean that they do not correspond to reality or experience).**

**Clare Hemmings (1995:46)**

The difference that mattered to early British and US feminists was the difference between women and men. The flip side of this oppositional focus on gender was a belief by many well-intentioned white middle-class feminists in the existence and importance of sameness among all women. But this essentialist view left many other women feeling excluded. For them *different* differences, especially of race but including class, ethnicity, ability, age and sexuality (what Knopp describes as ‘significant axes of difference’ 1995:159) contributed at least as much to their oppression as the patriarchy did. In fact, Hemmings, in her essay *Locating Bisexual Identities*, says that ‘The shift in feminist theories from focusing on identity as women to differences between women has mostly come from critiques of existing feminist theory as replicating hierarchies of patriarchy’ (1995:43). She goes on to answer the question posed in the quotation at the beginning of this section, by discussing bisexuality as the transgression of boundaries set up around lesbians by lesbian feminism. In discussing the traditional feminist lesbian antagonism toward bisexuality, Hemmings argues, ‘What this highlights for me is the lesbian feminist investment in maintaining sameness/difference boundaries, not because those boundaries are “true” or static, but because, in fact, they are not’ (ibid: 47).

Postmodern theories of the fragmentation of the self have contributed to the new feminist theories regarding differences between women, while queer theory’s focus on fragmentation rather than opposition has, more specifically, influenced thinking about differences between lesbians (ibid: 49). These theoretical influences are discussed in more detail in later sections.

### *The Impact of AIDS on Identity*

In the 1980s a deadly new epidemic cut a swathe through the gay community. HIV/AIDS obviously had a greater impact on gay men than on lesbians. However, its secondary impact on gay culture was to give it another focus for its activism and sense of identity. This resulted in the increased visibility of both gays and lesbians. Paul, Hays and Coates point out that on one level AIDS, initially depicted in the West as a disease of gay men, played to existing bigotry and raised old homophobia to new extremes. But on another level the heterosexual mainstream was presented with more sympathetic representations of gays, whether ill themselves or grieving the loss of friends and partners, or rallying to support and care for total strangers. It also sparked an awareness of the need for legal protections and recognition of gay relationships, especially to do with next of kin issues, and a new sense of gay rights in these areas (Paul et al, 1998).

The other important side effect of AIDS was, paradoxically, a broadening of the construct of gay identity, bringing to the surface as it did some anomalies between homosexual identification and homosexual behaviour. Sick gay men, grieving gay men, cautious gay men, all of whom identified with a gay lifestyle, may nevertheless have refrained from gay sex. Conversely, men who identified themselves unequivocally as heterosexual were discovered to be at risk, and to be putting their female sexual partners at risk, because they indulged in casual sex with other men and seemed to be in denial about the implications of this behaviour. Jagose gives this quote from a survey of men about their sexual identity: 'It's not important to me. I do it with men on occasions. It's more important that I am married and love my life...It's no one's business what I do on my odd afternoon off' (Bartos et al, 1993:27 cited in Jagose, 1996:7).

These complications in the understanding of what a homosexual actually is have their parallel in discussions of various forms of lesbian identification and lesbian behaviour, and ultimately contributed to the emergence of queer.

## *Gender and Performance*

**There is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything.**

**Judith Butler (1999:33)**

**Dominant discourses rely on the presence of an ‘other’, defining what is dominant through what is not.**

**Clare Hemmings (1995:48)**

Queer theorists, who view not only sexual identity but gender from the constructionist perspective, argue that categories only exist so that society can regulate and manage what is categorised. They would see even the terms *female* and *male*, and our sense of them as being mutually exclusive, as problematic. Kessler says we inhabit a culture in which ‘it is not permissible to adopt a position that is neither one nor the other’ (1990:25). In referring to the obvious challenges of intersex babies, people with XXY chromosomes and transsexuals, Cream says, ‘In each of these cases only one sex is allowed...Ambiguity is contained as well as medicalised....Those bending the boundaries of sex, pushing the binaries to their limits, continue to be defined as one sex or the other, the one we are becoming or the one that we leave behind’ (1995:35-36). Thus, transsexuals, who are products of a culture which insists on there being a *right* body for each gender, challenge the binary nature of gender even as they confirm it.

Cream refers to Judith Butler’s highly influential theories on gender as a performance that requires constant repetition, that is, not something that we *are* but something that we *do*, although involuntarily, and she says we need a new vocabulary to discuss and understand sex and gender. Moreover, Judith Butler argues against gender as the basis for identity. She believes that feminist theory, by taking ‘woman’ as the unassailable starting point, actually supports the idea of heterosexuality as the norm. In citing gender as following in a limited way from anatomical sex, to the exclusion of every category other

than male or female, feminism denies the existence of differences, and deligitimizes homosexuality (Jagose, 1996:84). This position concerns some feminists who assume gender as the starting point for an understanding of power relations, and some lesbian and gay activists who would establish communities and policies on the basis of sexual identity. But Butler states, 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender (1990:33). Instead, these expressions are nothing more substantial than repeated acts which signify gender but result from what Butler calls the 'cultural fiction' of gender. And by being repeated, these expressions reinforce the idea of an underlying, informing, natural gender identity. As Jagose says, 'Performativity is the precondition of the subject' (1996:86).

The women in this study discussed understanding intellectually that gender is socially constructed, but a few admitted they still found themselves caught up in notions of femaleness/femininity and felt some disorientation in trying to determine where they fitted into a new same sex relationship:

VIRGINIA: I actually felt more authentic *playing* with all those ways of being the feminine object of a man's affection than I did when I was honestly fumbling around the courtship with another woman. I don't think I'd ever made a distinction between the role and the *me*. And also, I didn't have any role models for what I was trying to do in a relationship with a woman...[it] left me feeling ridiculous, and somehow wrong, inept, unskilled, not doing what I was good at.

Judith Butler makes it clear that the performative nature of gender in no way suggests a woman is psychically or emotionally free to shed her sense of herself as a gendered individual. 'Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation, nor can it be simply equated with performance' (Butler, 1993a:95 cited in Jagose, 1996:87). However, Jagose discusses the many ways in which Butler's performativity theory has been appropriated, misread and subjected to reductivity. She says of Butler's critics, in particular Sheila Jeffreys (1994:461) and Kath Weston (1993:5), that they literalise (and

trivialise) Butler's theories with their 'misreading of performativity as a voluntary theatricality' (Jagose, 1996:89).

### *Queer Theory*

**Queer is very much a category in the process of formation. It is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics.**

**Annamarie Jagose (1996:1)**

### **Journal entry**

*Talking with R. today about my sense of not having my experience represented in the literature I have read. She said she thinks I'm truly 'queer'. Her definition: an umbrella term for any kind of sexual preference/practice other than straight missionary. Could even include heterosexuals into S & M. And all along I'd been thinking it was just a new word for bisexual. But it's much more, and much more controversial.*

Many of the women in my study are old enough to remember when queer was a term of contempt which meant 'homosexual'. As the above quotations from Jagose and Alcorn suggest, today queer means something quite different, though it deliberately resists any slick attempt to define it. Perhaps it is easier to talk about what queer does than to pin down what it is. Queer's most notable property is its inclusiveness. It provides a discourse for the inclusion of every marginalized sexuality that has previously been excluded, not just from heterosexual culture but from what Bell and Valentine call the 'boundary-ridden' traditional lesbian and gay cultures. They state that 'queer embraced literally anyone who refused to play by the rules of heteropatriarchy' (1995:20), such as bisexuals, transvestites, the transgendered and those with an interest in S&M and pornography. It is this determination to both unite the sexually disparate and

disenfranchised and to stay outside traditional boundaries that most characterizes queer. And even if queer's rejection of divisive labels has not kept it from becoming a popular label itself, queer nevertheless marks a crucial development in the evolution of non-patriarchal, non-heterosexist politics. But as Halperin explains, 'The more it verges on becoming a normative academic discipline, the less queer "queer theory" can plausibly claim to be' (1995, cited in Jagose, 1996:1).

The twenty three-women in this study have adopted various paradigms in which to situate their sexual self-identity. None of us could claim an early and unbroken lesbian feminist identification, and some of us felt we were changing our attitudes about our identities as time passed. For these reasons I was especially interested to see how welcome the notion of queer would be amongst our sample. As with everything else in the study, our responses differed widely, depending on our ages, our politics and our personal networks and experiences.

In the 1990s many young lesbian and gay spokespeople began dismissing identity categories as restrictive and oppressive, and some university courses in gay and lesbian studies began to organize themselves around notions of queer. However, queer theory emerged as a response to a number of historical events and changes in Western thought, not all of which were connected with gay and lesbian politics. Jagose argues that psychoanalysis and linguistics, including Butler's theories on gender, provided the post-structuralist context for queer. Postmodernism, taking the constructionist position on sexuality, was destabilizing all that was once thought to be fixed. As discussed earlier, there had been a growing a backlash against what many saw as the wowsersism of lesbian feminism, and queer was seen as decidedly pro-sex and celebration. The AIDS crisis in an era of political conservatism in the Unites States and Great Britain exposed the identity politics of the gay and lesbian communities as inadequate, and queer presented an opposition with more political muscle.

But many radical lesbians refuse to get under the umbrella of queer with all the other non-normative sexual identities. They object to queer as a threat to the distinctness of lesbian identity. Jude Noble argues that those who have most to fear from queer's politics of inclusion are those who are being included. She sees queer as 'neutralizing any sense of difference as people are subtly conformed into the dominant dualistic heterosexist way of being' when they 'complain at the tedium of having to name the diversity and breadth of the community through the use of "gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and intersex", preferring the simplistic, reductionist term of queer' (2003:19). And Laura Cottingham, in her book on the mainstreaming of lesbianism, is scathing in her comments about Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Camille Paglia, the foremost spokeswomen for queer studies in the United States. Cottingham argues that queer is no better in the nineties than gay was in the seventies in that it still renders the lesbian invisible (Cottingham, 1996).

Other lesbian and gay activists refuse to willingly place themselves in the position of outsider after the long hard fight for acceptance. And many find themselves at odds with some of the practices and attitudes which strands of queer can embrace, such as pedophilia and sadomasochism (Jagose, 1996:112-119) or at the other end of the cultural spectrum, David Halperin's nightmare: 'Married couples *with* children – with, perhaps *very naughty* children' (1995:62 cited in Jagose, 1996:113).

In Chapter 3 some of the women in this study echo these concerns that the label queer is not only meaningless but that, by encompassing all kinds of minority sexual identities, it actually robs them of their unique identity as lesbians. Some also remember when 'queer' was used by straight society as a derogative term meaning unnatural:

MARGOT: I do think that what you come out *to* seems to be quite an important factor. 'Queer' didn't exist until recently. We used to call gay men 'queer' when I was a teenager, but it didn't mean what it means now.

Jagose remarks on the 'gay generation gap', in which the word queer has been appropriated by a new generation. Older people associate the word queer with

homophobic name-calling, in spite of its current fashionableness, and feel pressured to embrace it when in fact it has negative connotations for them. But Jagose stresses that queer *must* always be pejorative to be effectual (1996:105).

Some of us were comfortable with the politics, and with the term, whether we applied it to ourselves or not:

BECKY: Queer' is this wonderfully all-embracing term. It sounds much more tolerant.

SANDRA: It includes bisexual, and it also includes my straight women friends who...mix in lesbian circles. They live fairly straight married lives but they're quite happy to consider themselves queer because they're mixing in this community. And I consider them queer. One of my straight friends *really* considers herself queer now that she's not having a heterosexual relationship. Not that she's having a *lesbian* relationship (maybe she will some time), but she's within this queer community.

SUSAN: It covers people who don't fit in for other reasons, and it covers a degree of fluidity. I feel that there's a whole range of behaviours and a whole range of personalities, and I find a fair bit of intolerance within the lesbian community.

Jagose's book, which she stresses is tracing the development of queer rather than trying to pin it down and thereby 'domesticate' it, begins with this quote from Michael Warner: 'The appeal of "queer theory" has outstripped anyone's sense of what exactly it means'(1996:1). Regardless of the difficulty in defining queer (which is partly what makes it so attractive to many theorists) its existence marks an undeniably significant shift in the way we look at the nexus between sex, gender, identity, desire and behaviour.

## *Lesbian and Gay Images in Popular Culture*

**There has been a positive shift in the depiction of gay men and lesbians in television...By watching 'classic TV' reruns alongside current television offerings, viewers can easily perceive cultural shifts in the representation of homosexuality and homosexuals.**

**Nathan G. Tipton, *glbtq arts* (2003:8)**

**There's a whole lot of stuff on television. They had 'The Block' with two gay boys. The thing is it's a bit stereotyped, they're in their underpants the whole time...but I guess it's good they're on mainstream television. At least it's being spoken about.**

**Focus group member Sandra**

Having concentrated on individual and lesbian/gay community attitudes and positions regarding homosexual identity/s, I want to finish this chapter by looking at the appearance of changes in mainstream cultural standards. I began this chapter by arguing that any exploration of the personal experience of the women in this study must take into account the ways in which that experience is altered by the cultural context in which it occurs. I have traced significant theoretical and political shifts in the understanding of sexuality. These theories began in the academy, but have eventually become part of a more general cultural consciousness. Now I want to discuss the ways in which this trickle-down effect has been facilitated by the popular media, with the result that non-heterosexuality is both more visible to, and viewed more positively by, a heterosexual public.

Although there have been many queer, androgynous and overtly gay images in literature, music, film, theatre and the visual arts over the latter half of the twentieth century, I have chosen to concentrate on television for two reasons. Firstly, it is the common ground of popular culture, transiting categories of age, gender, ethnicity, education, ability and socioeconomic status in a way that no other form of art or entertainment does. Secondly, it is at once the most ubiquitous and the most subversive medium in popular culture,

coming as it does into our homes virtually free of charge, and often without any conscious choosing on our parts.

In the past few years there has been a proliferation of gay images in mainstream television. Though there have been depictions of the homosexual on television for decades, they have often involved offensive stereotypes, unlikely situations or compulsory tragic endings. But in 1997 the popular comedienne Ellen De Generes made television history by coming out to an audience of millions of Americans in an episode of her eponymous sitcom, and although the episode was not without controversy, and subsequent episodes of her series were disappointingly heavy-handed, a threshold had nevertheless been crossed.

Now every week on television we can see both real and fictional gay characters in a variety of social, political and domestic scenarios. Admittedly, there are still some stereotypical images (*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, Ch.10, *Will and Grace*, Ch.9), and some sensationalized ones (*Law and Order*, Ch.10, *The Bill*, ABC) but equally there are several series in which lesbians and gay men appear to be just getting on with their lives (*Six Feet Under*, Ch.9, *Stingers*, Ch.9, *All Saints* and *At Home With the Braithwaites*, ABC). Reality television has made sure gays and lesbians are represented (*Survivor*, Ch.9, *The Block*, Ch.9 and *Big Brother*, Ch.10) and there has been at least one drama series in which they outnumber the straight characters (*Queer as Folk*, SBS). There have been numerous documentaries featuring lesbians and gay men as public figures, sporting heroes and parents (eg. *Two Men and a Baby*, SBS).

Particularly relevant to this study is the fact that there have been several attempts to show heterosexual men and women unapologetically exploring the fluid nature of their sexuality with members of their own gender (*Sex in the City*, Ch.9 and *The Secret Life of Us*, Ch.10). The following extract was written some years ago when I had just begun researching this topic.

## Journal Extract, 1998

*Something came up in a class tonight that has me surprised and disappointed and sort of upset. It started with us talking about a character in one of their stories - a middle-aged woman who takes a female lover for a while following a painful divorce. Now, this is a very sophisticated group, predominantly mature age students, and their stories reflect a wide range of experience and understanding of the way the world works. And they're never coy about writing sex of the most adventurous kind. So I was dumbfounded when one of the women - late 40s at least and no fool - said she found the idea of somebody who had been straight suddenly being sexually attracted to another woman completely unbelievable. I was so tempted to say, Girl, have I got news for you!*

Some women in the study expressed conflicted feelings about what they saw as the depiction of predictable stereotypes, about heterosexuals jumping on the lesbian bandwagon as some kind of fashion statement, and about feeling embarrassed by too-confronting gay male sex scenes. The following comment refers, somewhat tentatively, to a recent highly-publicised incident which appeared on prime-time television.

SANDRA: I think it's quite interesting, that whole thing around the ARIA awards. Madonna and all these young girls...giving each other these passionate sexual kisses, like it's okay. Like it's fashionable to be out there. They're not real lesbians...well, Madonna's kind of meant to be bisexual...but they're just kind of pushing it to the edge. I'm not sure what I think about that. Well, I think it's good to be visible... I think it's good to be seen.

Whatever their reservations, most women felt that visibility is preferable to invisibility, because of its power to both inform and affirm while entertaining. As Philomena Horsley proclaims, 'Our involvement in the mainstream *has* made us "agreeable" ...but it has also made the mainstream more "agreeable" to us! We have agency there, we have changed things culturally as well as legislatively' (unpublished paper, 2002). The women in this

study were aware that new ground is being broken by showing situations and relationships on television today that would have been impossible even a decade ago.

FLEUR: I really like the kids today. In some ways they're very conservative, but ... they don't need to fight. They're much less racist than even our own kids were at that age, they're much more inclined to be accepting of any kind of difference. They've got more access to the world, so it's become smaller, and because of that...and a - in some ways - much maligned media...they see lots of positive images of all kinds of people. In the 90s, can you imagine us having something like *Queer as Folk*? And not being played by a bunch of straight actors. It wouldn't have happened.

VIRGINIA: I remember going to this documentary at The George on old films that had gay subtexts when it wasn't possible to be overt. And I know for years I had desperately wanted to see stories about women in love with each other, but there weren't any, or when there were, in the end one of the women always got a boyfriend and the other one killed herself.

So, while representations of gay and lesbian lifestyles on television are not without controversy the fact that they exist at all, and across such a range of programs, suggests a radically evolved contemporary popular culture. But where does this relaxation of dominant social attitudes toward homosexuality leave the lesbians and gays who have for years defined themselves in terms of their opposition to that dominant society? If there is nothing to struggle against what is the point in looking for strength in unity by preserving the community? If anybody can kiss anybody on commercial television, what is a lesbian or gay identity?

### *Is Gay Passé?*

Robert Reynolds, who has written challengingly about the current state of homosexual identity and community in Australia says, ‘A full thirty years after gay liberation swept into Australia the question needs to be posed: Is the idea and practice of gay life losing its appeal and its constituency?’ (2002:1) In his article titled *The Carnival is Over*, Reynolds recounts conversations with lesbians and gay men under forty, whose attitudes toward privileging a lesbian or gay identity vary from indifferent to ambivalent to hostile. Many of them, while not wanting to deny the reality of their homosexuality, simply refuse to categorise themselves in terms of it. For them, there is no appeal in clustering together with others under what is increasingly seen as a simplistic and exclusive sexual banner which may not even accurately describe them. Nor do they necessarily see themselves as oppressed by a heteronormative culture. Reynolds explains their positions this way:

You might say that being gay has become a victim of its own success. It began as a street protest, a rallying cry of an oppressed people. But as the years have passed, and gay and lesbian life evolved confidently and remoulded the mainstream, that sense of oppression, and the communality it engendered, has drained away. Were it not for the catastrophe of AIDS, which wrote new chapters of homosexual beleaguerment, this might have happened earlier (2002:2).

In the following chapter on identity, the women in this study express their views on sense of self, and their experiences of the lesbian community/s. Some of them reveal themselves as true representatives of the times they live in, less concerned with a strictly lesbian identity than with what Reynolds calls ‘the postmodern task of creating meaning through a jumble of identities, relationships and circumstance’ (2002:3). However, for others, identifying as lesbian is central to their interaction with society, announcing not just the nature of their desire, but of their history and their politics. It is true that women living openly as lesbians in 2003 are likely to have less cultural prohibition to contend with than their predecessors. But it is not possible, with any issue raised in this study, to generalize about the attitudes of the women who have participated in it. There are many

other factors apart from the presence or absence of societal disapproval that have coloured the experience of these women. For this reason, we hear these women in Chapter 3 speaking for themselves, with all their differences and qualifications, certainties and ambivalences, about who they are.

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**Chapter Three**

**THE DANCER OR THE DANCE: IDENTITY**

***Learning to Dance***

*Remember your eighth birthday,  
the grownup restaurant,  
the bunch of white orchids  
he pinned to your organdie dress.*

*Remember how he told you  
to plant your little feet on top of his  
and hold tight while you whirled round  
a room full of less extraordinary people.*

*You can still hear the music,  
still see the blur of smiles  
on the faces of the band, and the waiters.  
Remember how they all paused their lives  
to watch you waltz through candlelight,  
your shoes locked into his giant steps.*

*Remember how everyone applauded  
when the music stopped  
and you thought it was for you.  
You believed him when he said  
you were the prettiest girl on the floor.  
When your first partner is a handsome prince  
what else could you be but a princess.*

\*

**Identity, then, is an effect of identification with and against others:  
being ongoing, and always incomplete, it is a process rather than a  
property.**

**Annamarie Jagose (1999:78)**

In this chapter the women who participated in the focus groups and interviews speak about how they see themselves, how they think others see them, and what if any are the differences between the views. It is here, as discussed in Chapter 1, I wanted to be very careful not to misrepresent, with insensitive editing or clumsy structure, or through simple lack of understanding, anything the women said. For that reason I have opted for keeping to a minimum my comments on their quotations.

Any examination of identity, especially the identity of members of a minority group, must include a discussion of the language with which the members refer to themselves and are referred to by people outside the group. Historically homosexuality has had a rich lexicon of terms attached to it. These have ranged from the pejorative to the poetic, depending on who was using them. Labels have been assigned to homosexuals in order to single out individuals and groups for rejection, abuse or even medical treatment, but they have also been adopted as expressions of pride, solidarity and exclusion. Always the

terms used have reflected the attitudes of individuals and the wider society, existing as they must within a cultural context of the law, scientific thought, religious conviction and, to some extent, fashion. Judy Grahn has written a fascinating book on the origins and journeys of words to do with homosexuality, titled *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds* (1984). In it she illustrates the value of considering words in relation to their cultural context: 'In medieval Europe during the Inquisition the words for heresy and homosexual were identical in a number of languages...What *heresy* means literally is choice' (1984:276).

Today discussions of sexual identity take place in a terminological minefield, and throughout this study it was not unusual to witness small explosions whenever we addressed the subject of labels. It was difficult even to frame questions in words that would not be either inaccurate or offensive to someone. Realizing that everything I said could be seen to invalidate some woman's experience, I struggled in particular with definitions of the word 'become' and the word 'lesbian'.

### ***The Process of Becoming a Lesbian***

As well as issues surrounding the definition of lesbian, and who has the authority to do the defining, the notion of *becoming* a lesbian is problematic because it suggests a metamorphosis. As discussed in Chapter One, I expected some women to reject this emphasis on transformation as misleading because they feel that they are not so much changed as simply expressing a different aspect of their total sexuality.

But another way of interpreting the word 'becoming' is to see it as suggesting a continuous journey rather than a destination. It is clear from reading personal narratives (Cassingham & O'Neil 1993, Ainley 1995, Markowe 1996, Abbott & Farmer 1995, et al.) that coming out is often not an event so much as a process. Ainley (1995:5) quoting Stuart Hall, says: 'Identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being". It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture.' Certainly some of the women in this study feel that they

have been involved in a process. For years they internally accepted this lesbian aspect of their sexuality as very real and present, yet for a variety of reasons had not acted on it, or acknowledged it publicly. Some also admit that, theoretically at least, heterosexuality remains an option for them, so they are *still* in a process of becoming.

MARNIE: I just think that we're all sexual, and you choose the partner that you're the most emotionally attached to. If you want to put labels on things, for a very long time I was bisexual. When I say I'm a lesbian now I'm quite proud, but I don't think that I was necessarily a lesbian all my life. I've *chosen* to be a lesbian, because the person I want to be in a relationship with is a woman.

TANIA: I would have been in my late 30s. I was in a very *nice* relationship with a man...and I was very involved with the women's movement and in a CR group...I think I *chose* to be a lesbian because it was more consistent with what I believed at the time, and it was very very hard, because he was such a lovely man. In fact he said to me, 'If we ever split up you'll leave me for a woman, not for a man.' Which I thought was quite prophetic later on.

VIRGINIA: I didn't decide I was a lesbian, I just fell in love with a woman. It's not that clear cut for me, and it never felt like a case of 'oh, I've finally acknowledged who I really am.' I was who I really was before too.

Although only one of the women in this study subscribed to the theory that she had been 'born that way', some participants, referring to the title of the project, did in fact take issue with the notion of 'becoming' a 'lesbian'. When I asked them what was a more accurate way of describing their experience, as with everything else the answers varied.

DENISE: Acknowledging...in my opinion it's already there, and it's an acknowledgment rather than any kind of...transformation.

## ***The Politics of Naming: Labels***

**Journal entry, November, 1999**

*Categories don't matter as much as accuracy to me, and I wonder if you can ever have both. I don't want my sexuality labeled at all. Labeling sexuality seems like pathologising it. But I do want to express solidarity with other women who are lesbians. I certainly don't want to appear to be denying them, or denying anything about myself that is true. I have a lot of respect for these women who have copped flak because of who they are. If anything, I still feel like an imposter around them. I know the fact that I have a female partner gives me entrée to their world. But essentially, categories are for other people's benefit; they don't tell me anything about myself.*

*I have a laugh about it sometimes, say I'm not a very good lesbian. I'll be ogling some man on telly, or just generally being politically incorrect. I don't see how I can possibly be labeled. I know things about myself that other people don't know, quite important things that the label won't tell them. And, since I haven't lived as a lesbian for most of my adult life, I don't have any of that history of the outsider that the term lesbian suggests. So if you put me next to my very butch friend who knew she was a lesbian from the time she was eight years old, my friend who has never had even the tiniest fling with a man but who also isn't currently in a relationship with a woman, and you hang signs around both our necks that say 'lesbian', well, what are you describing?*

In the Western world strict definitions of sexual orientation continue to operate and have only recently been challenged by the emergence of queer theory. According to Grahn, this has not been the case with many traditional cultures: 'The modern patriarchal society has usually defined "natural" to mean rigid adherence to sexually dictated roles delineated by a body of authorities over what constitutes the masculine and what constitutes the feminine sphere of society. The Indian idea of what is natural to a person means what the person's visions and spirits tell her or him to do with life', (1984:58).

The definitions which are typified by white Eurocentric and North American cultural philosophies have been important to both the heterosexual mainstream, which categorises in order to control, and to lesbians themselves. As Gayle Rubin says, ‘Our categories are important. We cannot organize a social life, a political movement, or our individual identities and desires without them. The fact that categories invariably leak and can never contain all the relevant “existing things” does not render them useless, only limited’ (1992:477). Nevertheless, the definition of lesbian varies within both mainstream and lesbian culture. A common theme developed through much of the literature is that not all women who call themselves lesbians would apply the term to all other women who define themselves as lesbian. Ainley refers to the term ‘never-hets’: ‘In this hierarchy, women who had always been absolutely clear about their sexuality were suddenly “real lesbians”, as distinct from those who had taken longer to discover their sexuality. And, according to this same rubric, lesbians who were mothers, or who wanted to become mothers (those who had had, or who wanted to have, sperm inside their bodies), were not lesbians at all’ (1995:51).

Conversely, some women who are defined by others as lesbian query the term in relation to themselves or reject it outright. In this study there were women who refused any sort of label because they simply didn’t like being categorized. But there were also a few who genuinely questioned whether or not they qualified as lesbians. More than one used the word ‘fraud’ in describing her feelings of being inauthentic. This may indicate an acceptance of the hierarchical nature of lesbianism which Ainley refers to, but may also reflect the woman’s sense of discrepancy between what she understands ‘lesbian’ to mean, and what she knows about herself:

MEL: Well, I’m not really a lesbian, am I? You’re just jumping to conclusions. If I talk about all those who’ve known all their lives they’re lesbian, I don’t fit in there. And I’m not about to say I hate men because I don’t. I just don’t seem to fit in. I think that’s probably the story of my life.

Adrienne Rich rejects a narrow set of criteria; her lesbian continuum includes ‘a range of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman’ (Rich, 1980:648). This was a position supported by most of the women who took part in this study. The idea that lesbian is as lesbian does was considered too simplistic. The following comment is typical of those who were unwilling to be labeled a lesbian after their first relationship with another woman:

JANE: I felt I’d just done another *behaviour*, that’s all. It was one behaviour in how many other behaviours...It was a surprise to me, and it caused me to *be* labeled. It didn’t cause me to label myself, it caused me to *be* labeled.

There’s a possibility that we were describing an experience that our society has no label for, and this is one reason why many of us tended to shy away from being categorized. There were some different ideas among the women interviewed about what being a lesbian actually means, but this is by no means a debate confined to our focus groups. As Ainley explains, ‘During the 1970s and 1980s some women saw lesbianism as a political rather than a sexual identity. They took on the label “lesbian”, without having had any sexual contact with women and without necessarily having any intention of doing so’ (1995:97). This was true for one of the focus group members:

FLEUR: I started defining myself as a lesbian... a good 12 months before I was actually involved in a relationship with a woman. I hadn’t had a sexual relationship of any kind. So that was when I actually sat down and told my family and friends that I was a lesbian.

### ***Lesbian Feminists and Feminist Lesbians***

The history of the relationship between feminism and lesbianism is a close but troubled one. Although both groups saw themselves in opposition to the patriarchy, straight

feminists were often at pains to distance themselves from their lesbian sisters. Jagose says,

Betty Friedan, a pioneering second-wave feminist and author of the influential book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1965), saw militant lesbianism as potentially undermining feminist gains and has been credited with naming the nascent lesbian movement ‘a lavender menace’ (1996:45).

The result was that by the late seventies a deep division had developed in the Women’s Movement between straight women and marginalized radical lesbian feminists who denounced heterosexual sex. Lesbianism was seen as a political imperative for some feminists and did not include an examination of desire. For these women feminist sex was lesbian sex.

The emergence of the lesbian-feminist movement in the early 1970s is often linked in the popular imagination to the devaluing of desire because its definitions of lesbianism were rendered in political rather than sexual terms. *The Woman-Identified-Woman*, an influential paper written by the lesbian feminist group known as The Lavender Menace (subsequently renamed Radicalesbians) was circulated at the Second Congress to Unite Women in 1970. It described a lesbian as ‘the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion’ and lesbianism as ‘a category of behavior possible only in a sexist society characterized by rigid sex roles and dominated by male supremacy’ (ibid: 48).

However, this picture of a generation of earnest, sexless, angry women has many detractors who view it as an oversimplification. Joan Nestle states, ‘The term political lesbian has had different meanings at different times...it was explained to me as meaning a woman who consciously gave up relationships with men to become a lesbian until sexism and women’s oppression ended; the woman who explained it to me defined her lesbianism that way... I thought, but didn’t say, “Great. After liberation you can go back to men, but I’ll still be queer, so where does all this leave me?”’ She goes on to say, ‘There is a strand of lesbian-feminism that believes all sex to be oppressive, destructive, and so forth, but fortunately, it’s not a popular one’ (1992:140).

And Ainley adds, 'Taking the sex out of lesbianism is a criticism often levelled at lesbian feminism. The late 1980s and 1990s have been credited with putting the sex back in. On one level this is nonsense. It suggests that feminist lesbians were too busy going to meetings to fuck, or that they were all "political lesbians"' (1995:97).

While none of the women in this study dismissed sexual desire for other women as optional, there were some who did favour the term 'lesbian' because they identified with its political and historical dimensions, and believed it was important to preserve and convey these to others.

FLEUR: I guess because I've always been fairly political...it was really important to me that I did define myself as a lesbian. I wanted to be able to label myself something that I was comfortable with, something that made it very clear to other people who I was, that I wasn't hedging my bets. This wasn't a temporary phase I was going through (laughs), I wasn't going to suddenly turn around and start sleeping with men. And it seemed to me ...'gay' felt too wishy-washy. It didn't feel strong enough. I actually like the word 'lesbian'. I think it's ...it has a historical component that I like.

TANIA: I like the word 'lesbian' because it's political. I've never called myself gay, because I think that's a soft option, it identifies women with a male word. I identify as lesbian. It wasn't just that I fell in love with a woman, it was a choice to be in a woman's community, whether I was with a woman sexually or not.

Ainley suggests that Adrienne Rich's lesbian version of Kinsey's 1950s heterosexual/homosexual continuum meant that 'women-loving-women of all descriptions, and not necessarily sexual, could be welcomed into the lesbian sisterhood' (1995:98). This included, at one extreme, the idea of 'passionate friendships'. This term, carried over from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, refers to the intense and

emotionally heightened, but not sexual, attachments between women. But that position has always been controversial, and for some women in this study it was precisely the presence or absence of a sexual element in a relationship which determined whether or not it was a lesbian relationship.

JENNIFER: Most of my adult life my close connections were with women, and I had regularly wondered whether I was lesbian and hadn't realized it... But I always came back to 'No, I'm not lesbian.' My connections with women are all good, sound, nourishing...but not sexual, [not] erotic...

In addition, some women, when they thought of it at all, considered a lesbian relationship impossible because they enjoyed sex with men:

BECKY: I'd lived with him for twenty years or so, and (because the relationship had broken up) I'd been in a sort of sexual and emotional desert for about a year, and I was starting to climb the walls. And someone said to me something like 'Would you ever have a relationship with a woman?' And I said, no, I think I'm far too straight, because I'd had a very good sexual relationship with him. That was probably the best part of our relationship. I'd had three kids. And so I wasn't in a relationship at that time, but I certainly called myself heterosexual.

Most of the women in this study used the lesbian label, but it was also the word that gave rise to very mixed feelings, ranging in intensity from reluctance to distaste. It seemed to be viewed with more ambivalence than other terms. In one UK study 'lesbian' was seen by some women as a polite, middle-class term compared to the cruder working-class 'dyke'. Paradoxically this was a cause for both its acceptance and its rejection (Ainley, 1995:96). Some of the women I interviewed also demonstrated mixed feelings, but others disliked the term because of its negative connotations.

SANDRA: It's the word lesbian...I grew up in the fifties and the sixties, and the word 'lezzo' – it was a bad word. I used to read the word lesbian long before I came out, and it was scary. I didn't want to associate myself with that kind of

word...um, because it's a very *strong* word...it's like saying 'fuck' or 'cunt' ... It's a word that's kind of used in a derogatory way... I want to own it now, I want to say it proudly, I *do* feel that, but there's something about the word because of all the bad ways it's been used and misused against women. Women in general, you know.

BECKY: When you say the word lesbian, it makes people almost, you know, sit up...and then of course people used the word gay, and they used it in that really incorrect way, and that was a sort of easier way because it was a cover all. But very soon I wasn't comfortable with that because it was inaccurate...So...I started calling myself a dyke, and I was more comfortable with dyke than I was with lesbian, and I don't know why.

NATALIE: Coming from the country where I did... the word lesbian was sort of like a dirty word...I still don't like the label, because I have that sort of background that keeps saying it's not a nice word.

ELISABETH: I don't like the word because of the social attachments... it has negative connotations in the culture. I like the sexual orientation; I don't wish to be any other way, but I don't necessarily want to be called a lesbian. I really want all the experience and everything that goes with it but I don't think I'm happy to be labeled a lesbian. It is a disparaging term, and I don't want to find myself in a camp (laughter) if I can say that, where I might be disparaged.

CYNTHIA: I became involved with a woman, and at that point I remember thinking I do not want to label myself as lesbian. I don't like the word.

Some of us felt that labels were irrelevant, or that increasingly in this day and age women neither need nor want to be restricted by rigid sexual labels.

ELISABETH: I haven't really thought about how I'd like to be named... But I don't feel my interaction with society is different because I've become aware of what my sexual preference is. I think my hang up is my attitude that people would dismiss me once I put that label on.

VIRGINIA: Now I guess lesbian is the easiest publicly, and privately I don't bother at all, or I think of myself as bisexual, which is really just another way of saying I'm sexual. The reality is, if you've got a girlfriend, that's still going to be the issue whatever label you put onto yourself.

CYNTHIA: There was a time [historically] when it was necessary, but it certainly wasn't necessary for us.

JANE: Well, at different times, several of those labels could have applied to me...If I'm being really truthful I think I would have to say I'm bisexual. But I don't attach labels to myself generally speaking. I don't think they matter, in that I feel my identity is a bit fluid and ...sexuality is just part and parcel of my humanness. I don't really require it to be a category. The social labeling that occurred was a taking away. It was a *narrowing* of me.

Some of the strongest sentiments were reserved for discussions of the label 'queer'. Some of us were happy to embrace the term because of its inclusiveness. These women liked the fact that queer allowed for a variety of other people, as well as a variety of feelings, images and behaviours within themselves. As Jennifer explained, 'These days there is a flexibility, a wishing to be more....individual about one's identity, or expression.'

SUSAN: During [my relationship] I just felt really comfortable calling myself a lesbian, and living within my lesbian community, and ...now to call myself queer, I feel like this includes everybody I know, and that's important to me.

JANE: Queer would probably suit me quite well nowadays... it covers a variety of things other than just sexual stuff.

But there were those of us who felt queer was so all-embracing that it had lost any meaning. And there were also those who believed an increasingly casual attitude toward categorising was detrimental to lesbian principles, and to a sense of lesbian community. For them the term queer was not only meaningless but objectionable:

DIANNE: A lot of people are happy to be more flexible about labels, and that in some ways diminishes the sense of common purpose.

FLEUR: [When I came out] we didn't have the option of a queer community. It didn't exist...And I don't know that I would have been totally comfortable with that at that point anyway, because being with women was what was very, very important to me.

ELISABETH: To me, queer's ... not necessarily within the paradigm of homosexuality. I think it embraces (laughs) everything that's not heterosexuality. And I don't see myself as going outside the homosexual frame of reference.

TANIA: The queer stuff is quite different. It's about post-modernism, diluting the politicization of the women's community, and I would never lend my name to it. Everything I've read hides women's experience in a way that I think sexual liberation did. I think it's more aligned to sexual liberation than women's politics.

Choosing to be identified by a label appealed to some of us as a way of directing a political statement to heterosexual society. This particularly mattered to women who felt they were forcing straight people to confront some stereotypical images of what lesbians look and act like. It also was important to some of us to demonstrate solidarity with the lesbian community, as well as the extent of the variety within it.

SANDRA: I feel as if I'm on a crusade. I feel as if I'm a role model...I tell people after they get to know me...and what can they do, because their idea of a lesbian is some bloody woman in a suit who wants to be a man...and we've got no sense of humour, and we're boring: I don't want to be any of those things, but I certainly want to own the word 'lesbian'. We have to be seen.

VIRGINIA: Down the track I started realizing that if I was wishy-washy about calling myself a lesbian I was probably letting the team down. I know I'm bisexual...[but] whatever little margin of inaccuracy I might feel is in that word [lesbian], it was probably more important that I say, 'Yes, I'm a lesbian. This is also what one looks like.

Other women spoke of their responsibility to act as role models for younger women who might be wondering about their own sexuality, and considering life options as so many of us had been unable to when we were younger. And at least one woman insisted on the importance of validating difference within lesbianism. She saw herself as not just a role model, or an example to straight society, but a reminder to the lesbian community itself:

FLEUR: I felt when I first came out. ..that the way of life the label 'lesbian' belonged to needed to be broadened. Especially ten or twelve years ago, there was still a lot of the (lesbian) community who frowned on people who had lived their life primarily heterosexually, and who had children, especially boy children. And for me a lot of it was about making a statement that, you can say what you like, but I'm part of this community too, and this is how I define myself.

The passage of time appears to be a significant factor in the acceptance or rejection of labels. Many of us had vigorously resisted labeling ourselves in the beginning. While we had been happy to acknowledge lesbian behaviour and experience, it was as though we feared giving away something essential in ourselves if we adopted this new title. As two

of the following comments demonstrate, even though there has been an easing of that resistance, an aversion to labels is still present for some:

BECKY: Well I think we've changed, because initially we...I mean I... had problems saying I'm a lesbian. I said, 'I'm having a relationship with a woman.'

DENISE: I'm a lesbian, which I wouldn't have been able to say before I came out. I would have said, 'I'm Denise.' And I would still say I'm Denise.

NATALIE: I'm more comfortable with lesbian six years down the track, but I just prefer to be me. So you said 'uncomfortable with labels', and that's where I'd fit.

But some of us who were initially unwilling to label ourselves lesbians for a variety of reasons have eventually come to accept or even embrace that word, or other labeling words, as more or less accurate descriptions of ourselves and our current lifestyle. As the women discuss in their accounts of coming out, those first steps over the border often left them worried about keeping their balance. Kitzinger says women who see a future relationship with a man as a possibility, and women who have enjoyed or continue to enjoy relationships with both men and women, often feel that their sexuality cannot be classified as truly lesbian and are 'reluctant to label themselves, or to invest too much in a lesbian identity' (1987:103). But the way a woman feels about herself and her life in the early stages of a relationship with another woman is not necessarily how she will feel after a period has elapsed during which she may have continued a committed lesbian relationship, or had numerous lesbian relationships, had no heterosexual relationships and adopted a new social network. Some of us believed that, while our sexuality might be much more expansive and fluid than any label would imply, in practical terms, given our ages, a future heterosexual relationship or lifestyle was unlikely. Asked whether they had felt, at the time of their first relationship with another woman, that their life would be irrevocably changed by it, some women responded:

JANE: No, I don't think I did, but because she was such a public person in the city it meant that other people thought [I] must have switched. You know, people can't seem to ...you have to be on one side of the fence or the other. The man I'd lived with for 10 years, his opinion was that I must have always been a lesbian. But I was always just me. He and I had good sex, and I loved him. We had a good relationship until it started becoming a bad relationship. And I hadn't ever thought of it [lesbianism]. At the time, to start with, it was like someone had offered me a new drink, and I thought, oh well, okay, thanks (laughs). It sort of sounds like a very casual attitude, and I suppose it was. I didn't think that it was going to shape the rest of my life or anything. As it has happened, it has made a big difference in shaping my life, but at the time I didn't really see that that was going to happen....It was the decision to stay with her rather than just have a fling, even for a few months. That is what altered things. The fling in itself, wouldn't necessarily have made the difference, but deciding to stay with her, and share accommodation, all of that was acknowledgement of the relationship.

MARGOT: Absolutely not. For a start I didn't think that far into the future. But every time you make one big decision, it affects other decisions, and the process is gradual, but eventually you realise that you've closed off some options and given yourself a different set.

On the other hand, some of us who initially adopted a label have since come to see any one word as irrelevant or misleading:

MEL: I think when we first got together I was more acutely aware that it was lesbian, I didn't have a problem with the terminology. And I was aware that I had joined another group. Now a few years down the track I think I'm much more comfortable about it just being 'us'. I think I've actually eased up and feel less a need to be black and white about it...and labels...I don't know if I identify as a lesbian anyway...we're just us. I don't know what we are, but here we are.

There was no universal connotation for these labels. They had quite different associations for different women. 'Dyke' is a word which, in one or other of its variations, was used in the fifties to denote a very butch-looking woman. These days it refers to 'a regular lesbian who participates in her gay culture in her dress, mannerisms, attitudes, and so forth (Grahn, 1992:306). Some of the participants, aware of its shock value in the heterosexual community, had mixed feelings about using it, especially in public. In order to avoid misunderstandings some of us felt labeling words were best reserved for other women who identified themselves the same way:

DIANNE: I actually feel more comfortable with myself as a dyke than I do as a lesbian. ...it's my definition of myself... Whereas with 'lesbian' people feel free to make of it what they want. ...if you're an out and out 'dyke' it's stronger. It's probably not something I would use a lot, it's more internal. I don't think I would say it to people...except to my close friends. It's a word for women in the community.

VALERIE: It's a private thing. I'm Jewish by birth. And there are a lot of things that I can say with other people who are Jewish which I would not say...out there...because it could be misunderstood. I can do an anti-Semitic joke with other Jews, but I wouldn't say it out there. And to me the word 'dyke' is private...

MARNIE: I have to tell you it took me about ten years to be able to call myself a dyke.

Most women saw the term 'gay' as really representing the male homosexual community:

DENISE: It meant blokes.

VIRGINIA: I used to prefer the word gay, because I just didn't like the word lesbian. Now, because I know the history of gay, I see it in a more political way, and I feel myself cringing a bit when I hear it used to refer to lesbians.

TANIA: I have some gay male friends. They were my friends before I became a lesbian. But I wouldn't go looking to be part of the 'gay' community just because they're gay. Because I think they are male before they are gay, and most of them are incredibly misogynist. I don't think their experience is anything like the lesbian experience. And while I care about their struggle, it's not my struggle. I identify more with the indigenous struggle than with the boys' struggle.

Although several women used 'gay' in a generic sense, particularly when recounting conversations with straight people, or stressing the difference between themselves and straight people, only two women chose to identify themselves as gay in answer to this study's questions about labeling. It was also one of these women, and she was the only one who said this, who believed unequivocally that her sexual orientation was fixed, and that she was finally expressing her true identity.

RENE: I reckon I've always been gay. No, I reckon people are born gay. I don't know whether you believe that, but I think it's probably a genetic thing... I don't understand bisexuality. I mean, I know it exists. But I don't understand it. So I know I'm totally gay. There's obviously, you know, homosexual people and heterosexual people. The lady I had the first relationship with, she says there's degrees of homosexuality. And there's a vast range in between. But I know I'm totally homosexual.

Some women simply had a deep aversion to any sort of label or category being ascribed to them. One pointed out that she had previously been equally uncomfortable being described as heterosexual:

MEL: I've had labels all my life. I've been a Catholic, I've been middle-class, North Shore, Liberal voter (laughter) and I don't want any more labels, you know. I just reject the fact that we have to be in some pigeon hole, because I've lived my life in one. And I don't know why I can't just be me living with her and whatever that is. So I don't know that I'm identifying with anything much, except as being me and 60.

As I suggested in Chapter 2, this reluctance to being categorised finds a correspondence in today's queer culture and with the politics of *differences* rather than of difference in the singular based on sexual preference.

### ***Coming Out: The First Steps***

Time and again the women described those first steps over the border as occurring while they were in a state of euphoria, especially when there was a new relationship involved.

ANNE: I remember just feeling so alive...you know, just such...heightened sensibility. I've never been a drug taker, but you read about people on drugs and how everything...colours seem brighter and sounds are more acute, and you feel like you're walking ten feet up. Well, that was how I felt for a long time. I felt very alive.

Nevertheless, there was often an accompanying sense of vertigo. These women were volunteering to leave their familiar lives for the uncharted territory of a new relationship, and/or for whatever other new ways of being might be waiting.

MARNIE: Whatever it was, tell me the recipe...it was all consuming. It was really quite frightening, and I think I was mad for about eighteen months. I coped, I looked after the kids, but I was completely nuts. I did things that I would never do, and I have never done since...and in some ways I want that back. Sometimes I

think I want that feeling again, but it was self-destructive. I couldn't have survived it.

DENISE: People said to me, 'You're on the road to self-destruction.' And I was, but I didn't give a fuck.

SUSAN: So when I met this woman I didn't know where I was. But I knew that I was going down a steep hill and I knew that I didn't have a brake on the bike. And I was going very fast, and the whole thing just completely engulfed me. It was quite an extraordinary experience.

VIRGINIA: I was quite happy. I certainly wasn't looking for any excitement or anything. Well, I *got* excitement. (laughter) The fireworks! I just couldn't believe it. And I did go crazy, quite mad. And I think it took that madness. I mean, straight away I was imagining telling my children, so I knew that something quite serious was happening to me.

JENNIFER: Well, I can remember exactly the moment when I understood the nature of the feeling that I had for this woman. And I felt...completely...stopped in my tracks. Thunderstruck. Absolutely thunderstruck when I understood that. And I felt sick, just absolutely sick with fear. Because I knew ...I probably wouldn't have been able to articulate it at that time...but I knew, in some part of me, what it meant and that this was a watershed moment, and that from now on my life was irretrievably, irrevocably, changed. And it was absolutely terrifying.

ANNE: I kind of never felt I fitted in. I know this sounds absurd but somehow, by being married ...I felt like I'd found a place. Do you know? I felt like I'd found a place to be. And I was throwing it all away...for an incredible lot of uncertainty too. I couldn't begin to imagine how it would be.

The coming out process, even though it may eclipse other areas of a woman's life while it's happening, does not happen in a vacuum. Assessing the impact of becoming a lesbian on a previously straight woman is hard when you're also witnessing the impact of other big life events encountered simultaneously. Especially for an older woman, there may be the breakdown of a marriage, and consequent reactions of children to contend with, as well as fears about losing custody of younger children. These concerns may be quite separate from the woman's decision to come out as a lesbian. There may be issues of physical or mental health, and depending on her age there may be complications associated with menopause. Additionally, any new relationship imposes huge emotional adjustment, to say nothing of the possible loss of a home, of income and of friends, family and colleagues.

In the focus groups we tried to tease out these different threads in order to determine what was directly the result of the shift in sexual identity, and what was a secondary or a parallel challenge. For some women there was a stressful event or situation which acted as a trigger in their decision to come out at that time, and which they were required to deal with while they were also dealing with the repercussions of coming out:

DIANNE: From the time I was about forty I started to realise that increasingly all of my friends were not only feminists but lesbians...I was still in a marriage that had not been emotionally satisfying ever, but had seemed to be good for the children. And therein lies the ultimate irony, because my marriage broke up over incest...extremely dramatically. And after that point heterosexuality had absolutely no germ of attraction or interest for me...So it ended that phase in my life totally and absolutely and very permanently. And then I thought in terms of looking for a way to keep going – I was virtually on the edge of madness really – and I decided I would advance what was my lesbian life be having a very sexual lesbian relationship. So I deliberately chose a very strong lesbian, which I think unconsciously was what I needed then. ..It lasted about seven years. It was a traumatic time for me, because of those other things that were going on.

JENNIFER: For me it was an abrupt, unexpected, shocking experience of falling in love with a woman, at a time when my marriage was in real difficulties, and was coming apart – *that* was an inevitability. And I've often reflected on whether that prompted my openness to falling in love with a woman.

ELISABETH: I hadn't a clue what to do when you're married and you've got children. My response was, you can't really do anything. You're really stuck. So I stayed in that marriage thirty-three years. It wasn't until my mother died that I finally decided I was going to make a move...I think her dying gave me permission to leave the marriage. And that was the first step... I was very depressed. I also got pneumonia...just coming out of all the guilt and depression that went on with leaving the marriage...

Other women remember not so much a single event but a climate of general emotional stress in which their new relationship was a factor:

FLEUR: That first relationship, it was just a bloody mess. It was all over the place, and it took me years to actually sort out how much of it was about the S & M, how much of it was about the lesbian relationship, how much of it was about the couple that we actually were. And you've been mothering so long that you're used to making decisions with everybody else in mind. And I'm still not a hundred percent sure I've got those divisions right now...

LAURA: It added turbulence into an already emotionally chaotic climate. I was 48 at the time, with two children who were then very nearly adult, and it wasn't something that I had anticipated...it wasn't a rational, happy coming out. It was shocking. I was...I was in a state of shock for a long time.

Many of the women who came out as a lesbian *because* they had begun a relationship with another woman say their feelings were undeniable and all-consuming. Nevertheless, for some this exhilaration was sometimes mixed with grief over the loss of a husband:

DENISE: I had been married for twenty-three years ...and I met somebody and just ...just *fell*, you know. POW! It was just so wonderful... I was so fucking blown away by that woman that I just could not imagine living without her, so the marriage, all of that stuff just went. (pause) Which wasn't easy, and which, you know...still kind of...

ANNE: She was in a committed relationship, I was married, she knew my husband, who was very generous and warm and inclusive of all my women friends. And for some time we decided we wouldn't act on it. But eventually it just got to where we realized it was undeniable. So I left my husband, and I found that very difficult to do because he was lovely and very accepting and non-hostile...

VIRGINIA: There was that total cataclysmic thing where you throw caution to the winds. There was no worrying about coming out...that didn't occur to me, it wasn't even an issue. I was just crazy, absolutely crazy. I didn't think I was choosing lesbianism over heterosexuality – I just thought, I've got to have this woman. But it was also very hard... because I loved my husband too.

SANDRA: I got married when I was twenty-one. I would have thought we had a very successful marriage, and I still do. We did lots of things together, we were like-minded people, we enjoyed the same things. Sexually it was great with my husband...But I met a woman, and that was it for me. I turned around and kissed this woman, and it was like...Bang! And I knew then that it was just the most amazing thing that had happened.

BRENDA: I did fall in love with a woman in the early seventies. And it was...really difficult. I was obsessed. That went on for a number of years, and it was really a very miserable experience for me. But then I did become involved in several much healthier relationships, and I think grew up in many respects.

These quotes are typical of many group sessions where the women described feelings so intense they seemed like obsession and madness. But there were a few women who remembered this time as the beginning of a fairly painless transition.

MARGOT: I didn't know the rules. I didn't know anything. And I remember that moment...it was really important because...here's a woman, middle aged...and it felt like to me, this is who I am. I really can't describe how I felt. It was like a weight was lifted. Which is not to say I hadn't had a really satisfying and great relationship with men, and I still do, but that for me was like coming home.

And there are those who stress that the transition began with a conscious choice on their part, and one of the results was that they actually enjoyed a new sense of control over their lives:

VALERIE: Yeah, it was a decision - I just made myself be somebody else. I actually physically crossed the Rubicon. When I decided that my life would be different I actually moved across the river. (laughter) It was like, this is me now...I identify as a lesbian, and with that identity came the physical move. My whole life just changed. It was like going into another culture. I *chose* that, and I'm happy I chose that, and I'm highly unlikely to ever move back over there. I was visiting over there today, and I got lost, which was very symbolic.

DIANNE: It was interesting that in my first significant lesbian relationship, I did the courting and the wooing. That was very different. I made the decision that I wanted to have a partner and become sexual, and chose the person, and then very deliberately went about it. ..and I think I was seen as vulnerable and she was seen as predatory, which was totally false. She was a lesbian, and she was saying, 'This is not a good idea.' So I in fact made that relationship happen. I quite enjoyed that. It was nice to be back in control of something. Whereas I'd got married simply because I was pregnant.

### ***Relationships with Women Partners***

Not surprisingly, our impressions of our new lives were coloured by our experiences in our old ones. Most of us already had highly woman-centered networks because of our politics or the work we did. This led some of us into unrealistic expectations about what ‘taking that next step’ would mean. We wanted everything we already enjoyed with friends and colleagues, only with sex added. We wanted the qualities other women brought to friendship and workplace relationships, such as sensitivity, emotional understanding and a collaborative approach to problem-solving. We imagined, as one participant put it, that living with a woman partner would be ‘easy, like getting to sleep over with your best friend every night’.

### ***Journal entry***

*My friendships with women have always been deeply emotionally satisfying. I think lots of heterosexual women bemoan the fact that their male partners aren't more sensitive, understanding, articulate, helpful in practical ways – more like their female friends. So even though I had lots of lesbian friends who told me lesbian relationships had as many problems as straight ones, I had this utopian vision of what a relationship between two women would be like, and I still found it difficult to accept when mine wasn't like that. It's true we did talk more than I ever had with a man, but we didn't necessarily understand each other better. We were too different. We weren't enveloped by this great cloud of telepathic womanliness; we were just two more middle-aged individuals, set in our way and struggling with intimacy.*

VIRGINIA: I actually had expectations that being with a woman partner that you'd sit around having wonderful deep and meaningful conversations late into the night and stuff like that. And she's quite...well, she's better than any man I ever knew. But she's kind of blokey too (laughter) you know? And she thinks,

enough already. (laughter) And I think, hey, that's not the deal. You're a girl and you're supposed to talk. (lots of laughter) So it's funny when you think that it's going to be a wonderful romantic extension of the best friendships you ever had and...yeah, sometimes it is. We borrow each other's shoes, but then there's times we want to hit each other over the head with them.

For the most part, we were naïve. Sexual partnerships are different in nature from even the closest friendships, regardless of gender. Usually what mattered more were individual personalities. However, a couple of women admitted wryly that they were more skilled in sexual politics with a man than with a woman. This could have been either because they had had more practice, or because, as one woman put it, in a relationship with another woman it is more difficult to conceal one's thoughts and emotions:

ANNE: You can't hide. And I realized that I had hidden a lot with my husband. Because there was stuff that he didn't need to know, had no desire to know. Whereas she challenged me all the time. And it was pretty confronting. She always wanted more. So it felt like I was peeling the layers away. And I'd never experienced that before. It was scary. Really was very scary. I would say to my husband, Tell me how you feel about this. And he would speak for half an hour, and I'd say, no that's what you think. Tell me how you feel. And I never got that.

TANIA: It felt very adolescent. Like I was pre-pubescent. I felt like I knew nothing...All the things I'd learned about a sexual relationship were no longer valid. They just didn't apply anymore. I felt like I knew how to be with men; I was extremely good at being heterosexual. And I knew how to attract men. I knew how to get on with men and all that stuff, and I didn't know how to do it with women. And I still don't think I do...I always felt in control of my relationships with men; I always felt that there was a part of me that they couldn't have access to. Whereas the relationships I've had with women, I didn't feel like I could...hide. There were things that I felt they knew because they were women, that men just didn't know...There was this thing of not knowing who I was or what I was doing. There was sort of a sense of wonder and amazement.

MARGOT: I was jealous for the first time in my life. Intensely jealous. ...I had some trouble figuring out where women stopped being friends and started being rivals for the affection of somebody that I was nuts about. You know, I just had a lot of trouble with that. But also, that's making it sound more rational than it was; I was just nuts. Much more out of control than I'd ever been.

And some of us did find our expectations were met, or surpassed:

CYNTHIA: She was the first person to say I love you, you're beautiful. And so she opened me up. I knew it was in there, but I never could express my love, even to my children, the way I could after the egg was cracked open. And then I had this huge amount of love and tenderness, and I changed...I used to throw the most massive tantrums, regularly. And I used to be angry with my husband every day. I was very very angry, regularly. I thought I'd have a stroke actually, I used to get so angry. Now I very rarely go into a fit of anger.

ANNE: Everything about the other is incredibly interesting. And I think that's a really significant difference between men and women. Women enter into everything ... They want to know it all and they have a view about it all, and they care about it all. My husband was a lovely man, and I know he loved me, there's no doubt that. But there were whole facets of my life that he was just ...not interested in. Couldn't have given a toss. *And* to be fair, aspects of his life that I wasn't interested in. Do I care what makes your car go? No. (laughs) That sort of thing.

There are many jokes within the lesbian community about the tendency for two women to become so close that their personal boundaries seem to disappear.

CYNTHIA: We really did the merge thing, completely. And it got to the stage where I felt like I didn't exist any more.

VIRGINIA: We spent every minute we weren't working together. We found it hard to see our friends by ourselves. It wasn't very healthy, and we've gradually stopped clinging to each other like that...We were borrowing each other's clothes and makeup. And I know this sounds trivial, but I always liked that thing of getting ready in private, to go out, and then making a bit of an entrance for my partner's benefit. That's not really possible when you're squeezing into your pantyhose in front of her.

### ***The Bathroom Stomp***

*Take your first step to the side,  
then shake off any trace of pride.  
Let her watch you tweeze and squeeze –  
it's just like being Siamese.*

*Circle your partner, then bow from the waist  
to hide that dribble of toothpaste.  
(Notice all your floss is gone.)  
Now rinse and spit, put lipstick on.  
Join hands round that tube of gel.  
She looks great, you look like hell.  
But it's just girls so no one's judging.  
(yeah, right) And she's not budging,*

*so one step back and feet together.  
Such a long way from the mirror.  
With your left hand comb your hair,*

*reach for earrings, she's still there.*

*Step forward again and do-si-do.*

*This is how your mornings go.*

*Nothing's private anymore,*

*but isn't this what you got her for?*

*Someone who'd be just like you,*

*who'd understand the dance you do,*

*who'd know the womanly way to care*

*and share*

*and share*

*and share*

*and share.*

\*

Sometimes the dynamic between two women is not so much about disappearing into each other as it is about the attraction of opposites. The butch/femme paradigm is not something about which we talked much in groups, but I was interested in aspects of it, and will discuss it in Chapter Three when I look at marginalized groups within the lesbian community.

## **Sex**

Our discussions on both labeling and relationships with other women reflected what most of us had experienced as a new blurring of the boundaries between our private and public lives. As middle-aged heterosexual women, we had been getting used to sexual

invisibility. Galling as that may have been, it was still disconcerting to then suddenly be the object of curiosity and prurient speculation from friends, as well as a general public which might be titillated or repelled or both by the idea of lesbian sexuality. As one woman put it

MARNIE: You say you're a lesbian and people automatically start thinking about what you're like sexually, and when you're heterosexual they don't. Your label drives people that way almost instantaneously.

Perhaps not surprisingly then, there often seemed to be a certain tentativeness in talking about sex, as the following journal entry reveals.

**Journal entry, 20/2/00 (after a second meeting with Focus Group 1)**

*After we had already turned off the tape recorder...S. said something like 'I don't know if this is relevant but I would have liked a question about boundaries – I don't think we talked about boundaries enough.' I wasn't sure what she meant and she said she would have liked to know how other people felt when – after having been heterosexual for so long, and considering themselves heterosexual - they had to be sexual for that first time with a woman. I suddenly realized that the reason nobody had talked about SEX was because I hadn't asked the right questions. I thought I'd been very thorough, but I obviously wasn't very direct. S's question was fundamental! Everybody was already moving towards the door, but this stopped them in their tracks. They all wanted to talk about this, about their initial ignorance and lack of confidence, their embarrassment about being in the sexual spotlight, etc. As one of the women said, 'I was worried in case I didn't know what to do.'*

*I was in a state of shock suddenly realizing that now, after hours of being together, one of the participants was opening up an area that I should have opened, or worse, that I thought I **had** opened. It becomes obvious that my own sensibilities are going to get in*

*the way. Too much discretion is not going to work here. I must try to make it easier for the women to talk about this.*

Many people are uncomfortable talking about sex. Markowe, in a survey of both heterosexual women and lesbians on communication, states: 'Topics found difficult to discuss with others as adults included relationships and/or sex, mentioned by approximately two-thirds of the participants' (1996:155). Quite understandably, many lesbians refuse to discuss their sexual practice because it has so often been the focus of male fantasies and a heterosexual blend of horror and fascination. But it would be misleading to suggest that sex was not an important factor for the women in this study, when in fact for most of us desire was the impetus for this life change.

SUSAN: I think we spend so much energy fighting against that initial image of the lesbian in bed that we end up avoiding discussing sexuality as anything more than a concept.

Many of the women remembered having talks with friends about heterosexual sex as early as adolescence. In the focus groups we found we could now laugh about what for several of us had been something equivalent to our first sexual encounter as a teenager, only without the benefits of advice from girlfriends. We were all familiar with the widespread notion that because both partners have basic anatomy in common, everything would just naturally fall into place. Some of us felt this as a great pressure. We were supposed to know what to do, but what if we didn't.

NORA: I tend to be very organised when I do something, so I simply got myself as many books as I could on lesbian sex, and just went through them (laughs). I had tried to talk to my lesbian friends, who all became very coy, which was very unhelpful. Theoretically, I was well-prepared. It wasn't quite the same in reality.

VALERIE: I remember a workshop at the Women and Labour Conference...I asked "What do you do?" ...and nobody would say (laughs) and you know, we

had talked about relationships and everything. And I was desperate, so I said I was really new at this and I wanted to know...I wanted to add to my repertoire (laughter) and so I suggested that those who really wanted to talk about what you do meet at lunch time. And it was very illuminating. It was wonderful. I learned a lot...My perception is that they were a lot more open in those days.

MARGOT: Girls don't go around sort of showing themselves as much, not in my generation they didn't. And...it's not true that we're all the same. ...And somehow the idea of not having some kind of expertise...I'd heard all the mythology, you know, "Of course you know what to do because it's like being with yourself." And so I felt ...something was really wrong if I didn't know exactly what to do, and I don't think I ever had that feeling with a man.

VIRGINIA: There was the curiosity about how another woman would be different from me. And I didn't find that because we were both women we both just intuitively understood what the other liked. Maybe I had expected that to be the case, but it wasn't. I just put that down to learning about each other. But what was nice was that you could take your time, and cuddling didn't always have to end up somewhere else.

In the end we found that feeling comfortable with sex has less to do with the partner's gender and more to do with their, and our, attitudes, temperament and emotions. As with any relationship, other issues could get in the way:

ELISABETH: The first thing for me...one of the early things... was the shedding of my inhibitions about my body and my small breasts. (laughs) It sounds like nothing, but in fact it was a huge, huge thing to come to accept your body and have your body accepted. I see now that it's the fact that you're loved.

VIRGINIA: My first serious relationship with a woman had so many other problems that we didn't just dissolve into uncomplicated bliss in bed, although it

was very passionate. Our heads were in quite different places in the beginning, and that certainly made an impact on the quality of our intimacy. Although on just the purely physical side of things, I couldn't get over how wonderful it was. I couldn't stop staring at her, and I remember wondering if this was how men feel when they look at a woman.

But for most women, even those who'd had some initial nerves, the experience was overwhelmingly positive:

ANNE: I remember being quite nervous about going to bed with a woman for the first time, and it was just completely effortless, and wonderful, and ...so I didn't need to have performance anxiety. I didn't need a road map. (laughter) It all just fell into place. It was wonderful, it was just the most wonderful thing. That incredible tenderness, and...cuddling things that women do that men don't. I just felt so happy, so good. (laughs)

DENISE: I had never ever before seen lights...an aura around someone. And to actually get to that stage in sex where you see the aura, and the colours, so your head's really out of it somewhere...

Tania had 'chosen' to become a lesbian for political reasons, even though it meant leaving a satisfying heterosexual relationship. She, and several others, said that initially they didn't rule out future relationships with men, but over time they became less likely, if not impossible.

TANIA: In fact at one point when a relationship had split up, I got re-involved with the man I mentioned before. That went on for a little while. I actually decided again...it was a different set of decisions...it was about emotions. I think there is something qualitatively different about a relationship with a woman that isn't about the physical relationship. It's about the quality of the intimacy...the

emotional, psychic intimacy, that is fundamentally different from the way it is with a man.

This last comment is representative of the majority of women in the study. In all the focus groups and interviews, it was ‘...the quality of the intimacy’ which appears to be the most significant factor in their relationship with another woman. It is the quality which the women most often found distinguished their relationships with women from those with men. And though this quality of intimacy was repeatedly referred to in our discussions on sexuality, it often had little to do with any sex act.

### *Minorities within a Minority*

**Lesbian feminism has generally argued that exceptions to the ‘standard’ forms of lesbian sexuality – such as bisexuality, sadomasochism or butch/femme – are ideologically suspect assimilations of patriarchal values.**

**Annamarie Jagose (1996:65)**

By the mid-seventies the liberation movement, which had aimed at freeing individuals from the constraints of a sex/gender system that locked them into homo/hetero and feminine/masculine roles, had lost its revolutionary edge. Both the gay and lesbian movements had abandoned their grand ideas of radical and universal social change in favour of an ethnic model which emphasized their identity and cultural difference from the mainstream (Jagose, 1996:63). The focus of this new model was the establishment of a concept of a cohesive gay and lesbian community which would have its rights recognized within the existing social structure.

The result was that those groups who did not fall into these normative identity categories felt disenfranchised from and by the ethnic model. This period has been critiqued by those who were ignored or excluded because of race and non-normative sexualities, such as bisexuality, S&M, Pornography, Butch-Femme, transgendered and intergenerational sex (where a wide age gap exists, especially between an older man and a minor). For

these groups attempting to determine 'sexual orientation' solely by the gender of the chosen sexual object is both obviously inadequate and exclusionist. Sedgwick lists the many ways, apart from the gender of the sexual object, in which an individual's 'sexual orientation' can be determined: 'preferences for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc, etc.' (cited in Jagose, 1996:63).

This chapter has already shown how some of the participants in the study believe that, because of their heterosexual histories and certain residual tendencies reminiscent of a heterosexual lifestyle, they will always be stigmatised by sectors of the lesbian community. And there exists among the participants an even smaller group of women who feel themselves to be excluded because of the way they express their *non-heterosexuality*. While critiques of existing feminist theory have created a shift from emphasis on sexual difference to differences, and these differences have been articulated in various discourses, for some of the women in this study, their marginalised positions are still difficult to talk about openly. In the process of the interviews and focus group discussions, five women spoke out about their sense of being ostracized within the lesbian community. Their transgressions included identification with bisexuality (2), butch-femme (2) and S&M (1). This study is concerned with representing those women whose voices are often not heard in published/public accounts of lesbianism, because as Jagose, quoting Dorothy Allison (1984:111,112) asserts, 'within a movement "which developed a major analysis around the issue of silence" certain sexual desires remain unspeakable' (Jagose, 1996:66).

## *Bisexuality*

**Within feminism I perceive that the move from politics of identity (1960s and 1970s) towards politics of difference (late 1980s and 1990s) has facilitated the renewed interest in bisexuality to a great extent.**

**Claire Hemmings (1995:42)**

In *Bisexual Identities* (1998) Ronald C. Fox points out that what research there is into bisexuality has been woefully inadequate. Results of studies have often amalgamated bisexual with homosexual experience, with the consequence that bisexual results have been buried altogether, with skewed findings regarding both. Previous research has also been strongly influenced by the dichotomous view of sexual orientation. Fox cites Bergler, who in 1956 called bisexuality a 'fraud', stating "Nobody can dance at two different weddings at the same time" (p. 80, 81). This sets up an interesting image of a determined woman with a foot planted in two reception centres, and the rest of herself as a bridge between them. In fact, the concept of bisexuality as a bridge between homosexuality and heterosexuality is quite common among researchers. But Daumer (1992) argues that bisexuality should not be understood as a bridge connecting the polarities of hetero and homosexuality, but a vantage point from which to critique the assumption of mutual exclusiveness (Jagose, 1996:70).

In Chapter 3 the women in this study discuss what labels they are most comfortable applying to themselves. Both Jane and Virginia speak about the difference between what they said publicly and 'the truth'. Other women acknowledge having been accused of sexual fence-sitting prior to coming out as a lesbian, and most of us have found this inaccurate as well as offensive. Referring to the findings of Golden 1987, Ponse 1978, Rust 1992, 1993 and DeWolf 1979, Fox discusses attitudes in lesbian communities toward bisexual women: 'Some respondents were accepting of women who admitted ongoing sexual attractions to men or who considered themselves bisexual, but many believed such women were not 'real' lesbians or had not yet completed the coming out process' (Fox, 1998:60). Jagose, referring to Daumer (1992:92), adds: 'Bisexual women are thus lesbians who maintain their heterosexual privilege instead of identifying fully

with a devalued social identity... [they are] pre-genderised, polymorphously perverse, or simply sexually undecided, uncommitted and hence untrustworthy' (Jagose, 1996:65). It is not difficult to understand the reluctance of some women to declare themselves bisexual.

But other critics consider the feminist lesbian regulatory model ideologically suspect because of its emphasis on the binary opposition of homo and heterosexuality. Jan Clausen argues, "When we assume lesbian identity to be unambiguous, when we are dismayed to discover attractions to men co-existing with women-loving, we reinscribe in a different form a prevailing, cultural myth about sexuality" (cited in Jagose, 1996:69). Several of the participants admitted that for them, theoretically at least, sex with a man was possible and could be pleasurable:

FLEUR: For me, I like women better than men. But I could sleep with a bloke tomorrow. If I met a guy who I was sincerely attracted to in other areas, it wouldn't make me throw up to sleep with him. I'd be a liar if I said it did. I had a lot of fun when I was sleeping with men. I didn't fall in love with them, but I had fun with them. And I genuinely believe there are people, and I've known a couple, who just fall in love with people.

The following quotes are from two women who put themselves into that category:

VIRGINIA: When I first met my partner I was still actually in love with my husband, so, you know, I did a bit of...emotional juggling for a while. Even though I ...it's not that I hadn't felt attracted to women before, but I'd always been really attracted to men too. And so it seemed like any label I picked wasn't going to quite work. And I had kind of tentatively flirted with the idea of bisexuality, but that seemed to be so politically like a minefield. (*At this point on the tape there are murmurs of agreement audible in the background.*) Like, have the courage of your convictions. And one of the things that I found really hard was that it seemed that I was forced into either saying I was a lesbian and denying a whole

other part of my life that actually still ...was true for me....you know, I didn't spend the first forty something years of my life pretending to like men. I did like them. I liked a lot of men, and I liked them a lot.(laughs) I actually *don't* fit on one side or the other. I just don't. I've had a lot of time to think about it, and I've got nothing to prove any more, and that's just it. And if I don't say it, I'm lying. I can't help it if that makes people uncomfortable. I know lots of lesbians who admit they could sleep with a man, but I could love one.

JANE: I don't think it's impossible to find the qualities that I appreciate in my female partner in a man. However, it would be an uncommon man that this would be true of. And possibly not a man of my own generation, possibly younger...I've never felt that having a committed intimate relationship with a woman meant that I could not also consider the possibility of a relationship with a man if the other relationship fell apart. I never felt that I crossed over to a different camp. It was an increase of possibilities. But other people, both heterosexual and homosexual, would like you to be on one side or the other.

### ***Sadomasochism***

**Where we live under oppression...we have little alternative but to take pleasure from our oppression.**

**Sheila Jeffreys, 1993:179**

Sadomasochism is generally understood by lesbian feminism to be a form of sexuality which eroticises cruelty and powerlessness, thereby mimicking some of the worst manifestations of heterosexual relationships under patriarchy. Five years after Jeffreys wrote *The Lesbian Heresy: A Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution* (1993, cited in Jagose, 1996:66) Fiona Scorgie, in her essay 'The Politics of Lesbian Pornography' (1997) points out that:

Although the philosophy of cultural feminism probably has less credibility in feminist circles *today* than it did in the seventies, it could be argued that there remains a residual tendency (within feminism) for sexual practices to be assessed ...according to the norms of 'politically correct' sexuality...[and to] become stigmatised as morally unacceptable, within the terms and ideological boundaries of feminism.

(Scorgie, 1997:6 citing Salaman)

Fleur, who identifies herself as an S&M lesbian, is well aware of the stigma attached to S&M. In the following lengthy extract, she comments:

FLEUR: Even today there is a level of marginalisation. It's easier to say I'm a lesbian. But it's still hard to say I'm an S&M lesbian. Immediately you get stereotyped with the bike and chains. By both the straight and gay communities. In fact, in some ways, more by the lesbian community than the straight...because they think you're a bad reflection on them...What they don't get is that for most people who are into S&M, it's just another form of playing. It's *fun*. It's about sensuality, and some people have a desire for a wider range of sexuality than others...In the beginning I didn't even realize what it was. It didn't need a name, it was just a lot of fun. Later on down the track when I found out, I was like, that's S&M? I don't care. That's nice. I'll do that again. A little bit of this and a little bit of that, and I'm happy. And I think...people wouldn't *do* it if it felt bad.

I guess one of the really pivotal moments in my life was when I realized that all of my really long term relationships have been with women who either are in to S&M, or had been, or were about to get into S&M. I didn't know a lot about lesbian sex in the beginning. It was just (laughs) oh, that's an interesting way to do it...I don't have a lot of hang-ups sexually anyway – never have had, god knows how I managed it with my background but there you go – I'm quite open to trying just about anything. Admittedly in my long term partnerships I tend to be in a submissive role more than I am in a dominant role, but that's only sexually, and

I certainly don't do sex 24/7. For me it's about sex rather than lifestyle. People tend to think I'm submissive in life, when anybody who knows me knows that's a load of crap.

### *Butch/Femme*

**Does the longevity of butch-femme self-expression reflect the pernicious strength of heterosexual gender polarization – or is it, as I would argue, a lesbian-specific way of deconstructing gender that radically reclaims women's erotic energy?**

**Joan Nestle (1988:14)**

Most of the women who had anything serious to say about the butch/femme polarity shared the lesbian feminist suspicion of it. As with so many terms examined in this study, the words had different meanings to different women. In the focus groups and interviews butch and femme were nevertheless bandied about lightheartedly by many of the women as shorthand but superficial descriptions of their own and other women's appearance and behaviour. For some there seemed to be an underlying irony about the images conjured up by the labels. For others they suggested rigid roles:

MARGOT: Women have been very oppressed by the patriarchy so I've always found it quite confusing that women would want to assume patriarchal roles. And maybe I don't know enough about it, but...I'm quite capable of opening the door for myself, and if I need assistance I'll ask. I can understand that some women would feel a sense of liberation in that they're able to be how they want to be...and you know, I think that whole thing with gender is a social construct. I think there should be a myriad of genders, or no genders. But...I find it interesting that it's the male gender that lots of lesbians want to...take on.

But one of the women suggested that the real issue is the conservatism of certain sectors of the lesbian community:

FLEUR: Lesbian feminists say it's so anti-feminism. And you know, a lot of the butch/femmes ...they're very much bar dyke-type people. They don't have that kind of feminist politics, and it's about that's what makes you feel good so why not do it...What [lesbian feminists] object to is anything...and I don't think it's just about butch/femme...it's *anything* that happens to be extreme...like the lipstick lesbian thing that everybody got so angry about a few years ago. The thing that infuriates me is...there is no admission that the majority of lesbian women dress in a semi-masculine way. They do. A group lesbian feminists have tended to try to keep a kind of soft butch dress code that was a very radical image in the 60s and 70s, when it's no longer a radical anything. It's become very conservative, down-played, let's not admit we're anything out of the ordinary.

For the two women who identified with the labels (one with butch, one with femme) it is very much about theatre, a way of dressing up and playing out fantasies that explore the nature of attraction and power. It is interesting to note that both of them talk about being able to change roles when they feel like it, in spite of being naturally more drawn to one.

FLEUR: In the butch/femme world, there are certain stereotypical types of behaviour that often happen. A femme expects to have a door opened for her. You don't go and jump in the car, you wait for the butch to open the door...So how people perceive the roles of butch/femme is that butch is dominant and femme is submissive...and that's absolutely not true. Everybody knows some incredibly sweet, feminine-looking woman who could swallow razors for breakfast. It's true...and a lot of them were our mothers. I rest my case.

SANDRA: When I first came out as a lesbian I was probably more of a tomboy... butch/femme didn't really mean anything to me. But certainly I remember going through this in my early 50s. I liked to wear more masculine-looking clothes. I looked great in a tux (laughs). I remember being in a bar, and wearing this white jacket, and I felt completely in control, whereas before I hadn't [felt that] in a

sexual role. Growing up as a young woman I had to be passive. And that really wasn't in my nature. And so I really enjoyed that aspect of it. I did get caught up in the role... that was a very exciting time...I think sometimes that I would have liked to have been a man. Only in fleeting moments...but to know what that experience is like... I guess that was a kind of fantasy. I was the leader in the dancing... And sexually... I was very good at making love to people...the person who made the first move. I quite liked that whole role...[it] gave me an opportunity to play with those fantasies. ..It depended on who I was with too.. With one woman I felt more inclined to be butch because that was something she really liked... I've been out now for twenty years, and still I would consider myself more of a butch than a femme. But although I enjoyed the role, in a way I missed out...it wasn't enough. Since then I've moved on...I've changed. The thing I like now is I can be both, and I don't feel I have to be one or the other. ..But having had to go through that transition, looking at my sexuality - whereas I don't think heterosexuals do – I think I have more options. I'm generalising here but ...I think having been part of a marginalised group gives you more choices. And I like the idea that you can be a bit different.

The more stigmatized role has traditionally been that of the femme. In other chapters some women, not necessarily those who see themselves in terms of the femme role, have discussed their conflict over feeling obliged to give up things that had always given them pleasure. Fleur, who does consider herself marked as a femme, comments on the criticism she has encountered:

FLEUR: From my perspective, being femme is about reclaiming stuff... If I want to wear silk and satin underwear and a frilly skirt and a skin-tight top I'm entitled to. And I really resent anybody else trying to tell me I'm dressing in a way that will please men. I couldn't care less...it feels good to me and makes me feel more like a woman. It is not a conditioned role that has been put on me by society. I know enough about role-playing to know that. It's about the feel of that particular fabric on that particular day, the way that skirt happens to swirl. And anyway, why

the hell shouldn't I have access to thousands of years of feminine history if that's what I want.

In most cases the women who participated in this study were those who for many years had had their sexuality affirmed in relationships with men:

DENISE: I got a lot of stuff back from blokes that was very affirming to me, you know. They made me feel good because they thought I was sexy and I looked good and all that kind of stuff...so I kind of pursued that because there was an identity there.

One of my interests in this study lies in exploring the way self-concept is reinforced by notions of 'who I am not' as well as by notions of 'who I am'. A lesbian identity requires there to be a majority of women who do *not* define themselves as lesbian. I wanted to see if this policy of identity through exclusion was enforced with other identity labels and positions, in particular that of the *feminine*. Rather than dispute the politics of that word, I concentrated on its use as a self-descriptor, and on whether it only has meaning in opposition to some notion of 'masculine'. I wondered if these women might be only attracted to other women who affirmed them by exhibiting a sexual persona which contrasted with their own. And for some this was the case. But while opposition was a factor in attraction for some women, it seemed to have nothing to do with masculinity, and a lot to do with rule-breaking and pigeon-hole-escaping. The presence of, and attraction to, ambiguity also came up several times. One woman who described her partner as 'dressing in a very butch way so that people actually stare' also said her partner was the 'girlie' one on the inside. And there were others who suggested that appearances can be deceiving:

NATALIE: My partner has often been mistaken for a man, in a shop or something. They might say 'sir' and then on closer look apologise. She is very tall, and has a deep (but absolutely female) voice. My theory is that it has something to do with the way she walks – she strides like she owns the world.

She takes up as much space as she wants to. And she's unselfconscious. This, in my experience, is not typical of women. So in one way I know what people are talking about. It's really, if I'm honest, what attracted me in the first place. It is so unlike the way I move through the world. And there was something wonderfully erotic for me in the way a slender wrist wearing a silver bangle could disappear into a pocket and pull out a hip flask of whiskey. Or the way those fine long fingers could roll a cigarette.... I remember once she let herself be talked into wearing a tuxedo to a ball, and I wore a long frock. She looked fabulous, really fabulous, in that androgynous way of hers. I think everybody would have found her sexy that night, including men. But the next day she put on a dress. She virtually never wears a dress...I think she was making...a statement of femininity to counteract the box she felt she was being shoved into without her consent.

These comments beg the sort of questions which are being answered for many lesbian and gay people by theories about queer identification and the construction of gender. For many of the women in this study, their experience of transition is proof that sexual identity is neither static nor simple. Having now explored some of its complexities, in Chapter 4 the women turn their attention to those areas of their lives where their lesbian identification might effect the dynamics between themselves and significant others: family, friends and the workplace.

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**Chapter Four**

**STEPPING ON OTHER PEOPLE'S TOES: SOCIETY**

***Not Strictly Ballroom***

*Your kind of dance  
was never about where the feet go.  
Your dance begins  
way above the knees, below the brain,  
in the centre where breath itself begins.  
It spreads from there down arms and legs,  
your blood drumming time, your movements  
strung in muscle, blown across skin.  
But outside there's such a racket  
it often puts you off your music.  
You believe you're just naturally clumsy.  
So you keep your eyes on those helpful footprints  
and repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat.  
Like the man said, Where would we be  
if everyone made up their own steps.*

\*

**Most members of any distinct group fit in most of the time with the society at large. Most American Jews cannot be distinguished from most American Christians by appearance, clothing, etc...Most American Indians do not paint their bodies or wear headdress...Yet some do. Sheltered within each community, at its heart, are the core members who do keep the older ways, even when these ways are disparaged and discouraged as stereotypes that prevent the group from assimilating... Among Gay people, this core or heart group is made up of the blatantly Gay, the drag queens and bulldykes who congregate, whether separately or together (and they do both) in certain urban and rural areas...They attempt to act out positions of social influence and meaning *as open homosexuals*...All other Gay people in the current culture line themselves up and measure their own behavior in relation to this core or heart group on a continuum stretching into its extreme opposite, which is assimilation or the imitation of heterosexual stereotypes for the purpose of camouflage.**

**Judy Grahn (1984:85)**

One of the conditions for participating in this study was that any woman taking part must have been out as a lesbian for a minimum of two years prior. This was partly out of a sense of responsibility to my participants. I knew from my experience in collecting data for *Talking Up a Storm* (in which a group of women speak about their lives and past events) that there can be social and emotional repercussions from publicly airing deep and complex feelings for the first time. I wanted to make sure that each participant had had time to process her experience to some extent, but if I made the qualifying period too long I might have to leave out some women whose contribution would be valuable. Two years seemed a reasonable length between initial experience and participation in the project. Obviously that experience was an ongoing one, but I had been out myself for two years when I began the project, and felt I had started by then to get some perspective on my situation.

The step across the border between the private and the public is a giant step, not just because other people now know, but because, by letting them know, the woman is often announcing that she has resolved whatever internal conflict she may have experienced. As one woman said in Chapter 3, there was a world of difference between having ‘just a fling’, and in acknowledging before family, friends, colleagues and the world in general that she has a significant relationship with another woman, or that she now wishes to identify herself as a lesbian regardless of whether or not she has a partner. Not only is the woman making a public statement, but she is opening herself up to a whole new set of responses and pressures. Karol Jensen, in *Lesbian Epiphanies: Women Coming Out in Later Life*, discusses the various reasons for negative reactions, and points out that homophobia is only one factor. Several of the women in her study on women who come out in later life commented that their family’s and friends’ responses were driven by fear of change. They were afraid her becoming a lesbian meant that she was going to ‘completely change her personality and not be the same person’, and also that her changing would lead to ‘a personal rejection of them and their life choices’ (1999:174 and referring to Sales, 1978; Gartrell, 1981). Jensen adds, ‘Coming out as a lesbian/bisexual woman will definitely change her life circumstances, but the core of the woman can be sustained. Only time and experience will reveal that to the people in her life’ (1990:176).

In researching this chapter I asked the participants to think about how their familial, social, work and public lives had changed, if they had, as a result of their shift into lesbianism.

### ***Coming Out to Family***

Kimmel and Sang (1998:194) refer to Tully’s 1989 study which reported that the majority (89%) of midlife lesbians turned to women friends for support rather than to their biological families. The study gave no figure for heterosexual women, nor did

Kimmel and Sang state what age was being taken as the median. However, assuming thirty-five years as the statistical mid-life point, even the youngest women in Tully's sample would have been fifteen years old in 1969 at the time of the landmark Stonewall riots. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that at least some of us in this study had families who embodied the attitudes of their era, and were unable or unwilling to support daughters and sisters whom they viewed as sinful or ill.

Obviously, one thing that made our experience of going public different from the experience of a young person was the fact that we all had an independent adult life established, separate from parents, by the time we came out. Consequently we had more control over how we received, avoided, or otherwise dealt with parental disapproval and concern. Nevertheless, for many people there is no age at which talking about sex with a parent is comfortable. Laura's account gives an idea of the difficulty some of us experienced in broaching the subject:

LAURA: I had to tell Mum, so I took her into the bedroom and told her to sit on the bed, and I said, 'I don't know how to tell you this' and she asked me what was wrong, and I told her, 'It's not your usual thing, Mum'. So she said, 'You're having an affair?' I said, 'Yes, I am, but it's different.' And she said, 'Well, tell me'. But I couldn't for the life of me. And I said, 'Look, I'll get in the wardrobe so I don't have to look at you, and I'll tell you' (great laughter) so I got in the wardrobe and I shut it. There were no slats in the doors or anything. It was that hot in there. And I'm thinking what am I going to say to her, how am I going to tell her. And she said, 'Alright, I can't see you. Now tell me what's wrong. It can't be that bad.' And I said, 'I'm getting hot now, I better come out' (laughter). I came out, and she said she'd scream if I didn't tell her. And I said, 'I'm having an affair with a woman.' And she said, 'Oh, my god, is that all.' And I just looked at her, and I said, 'Did you hear what I said?' And she said, 'Yes, love, I thought it was something really bad.'

Laura was fortunate, but for some of us the worry about distressing aged parents caused us to either conceal our lesbianism, or at least to refrain from discussing it with them. There were also the women for whom the choice not to speak about their situation was less a protective gesture and more a reflection of the overall nature of the communication between the woman and her parent/s:

ANNE: I have a difficult relationship with my mother. She just didn't want to know and I was complicit with that. And what she used to do was ask my brother. He and I are very close. And my instructions to my brother used to be, if she asks anything about me tell her to ask me directly, I'm sick of this indirectness. Because our family's not good at communication. And then some years ago I said to my brother, 'Look, next time she asks, just tell her.' And, so he did. She didn't make any comment... I mean, I had been living with my first lover very openly. And my mother used to come there, but she behaved as if we were housemates all the time. And when we split up and I was devastated...I mean I dropped five stone for god's sake, obviously things weren't great...she never asked a single question. She never said, 'Where's X, How's X?' It was like she had been excised from the memory bank. It was the most extraordinary thing. And she now just asks questions about my current partner. It's never been discussed, but it's gone from being underground to being an accepted thing. And the nature of our relationship is such that I don't need her to know, I don't need it to be part of her life. I'm glad that she knows that it's going on, but I don't feel any need to discuss it with her.

This rule of silence is something many long-identified lesbians are familiar with, but for some of us in this study it came as a painful surprise. On the whole conflict with, or rejection by, family members appears not to have been a major issue, though some participants reported mixed reactions from relatives depending on their ages and personalities:

FLEUR: My family were like that (gestures divide). One half were incredibly supportive, and went, 'Oh shivers, I should have worked that out for myself. You've always liked women.' The other half of my family was like, 'I don't want you near my kids. I don't want to hear any of that stuff.' And my ex-husband was delighted, absolutely thrilled to bits. Because it meant nothing was wrong with him, it was me. (laughter)

SUSAN: The possibility that I may lose my family members made a big impact on me, on the struggle of coming out. Particularly my mother – not so much my father – and I've got five brothers and sisters – you know, especially some of my sisters...I didn't want to lose the relationship I had with them, and I thought that could be a possibility, especially since we were all brought up Catholic, and we all had a similar sort of attitudes and things. In terms of the kids... I didn't think it would be a huge drama for them. Really it was how the family would respond.

Susan's reference to the Church is interesting because it was unusual for this group of women to cite religion at all as a factor in either their private or public transition. This is in sharp contrast to published coming out narratives from the United States, in which there are many references to the anguish caused by the women's perception that they were offending against their own deeply held religious beliefs. This was in fact one of the differences I had anticipated with Australian research participants. Australia's relatively secular culture does not seem to have produced, in the participants of this study, the sort of private spiritual crisis frequently experienced by their American counterparts. However, several of them, all former Catholics, did mention the church. They were interested in the current debate regarding the acceptance of homosexual clergy. After more than a decade during which lesbians and gay men have demanded to be accepted as full members in churches and synagogues, including the right to be ordained, Sandra had this to say:

SANDRA: The whole thing around the church I find absolutely appalling. And it's all churches...the Catholic Church, but also the Uniting church, although it's a bit more open. But I don't think it's ever going to be acceptable.

Susan's more personal comments were based the legacy of her religious education:

SUSAN: I think the Church had a huge influence on me and my coming out, and my sexuality and that sort of stuff. Especially in the first few years. I had a little inkling that I was attracted to a woman - after not even having heard the word lesbian or anything all through school - when I was about seventeen. And then straight away my education that I'd received through the Church came into play... *Any sex was evil, never mind lesbian sex...* (laughs) ...you know, I would be a completely evil person... so I just denied it as quickly as I thought about it.

But most of us had come to terms with the Church's influence on our sexuality prior to coming out as a lesbian when we had confronted sex outside marriage. However, Fleur still suffered from the loss of her good standing within a particular congregation:

FLEUR: My relationship with the Church changed completely when I came out. I'd sorted out what I thought spiritually a long time ago, so that wasn't an issue. But what was hard was that my whole family was very involved in the Church. My mother had most of her friends there, and my sisters and I sang in the choir. And we used to meet there all the time with all our kids for social events. But I realized I couldn't keep going to a place where I wasn't free to take my partner openly. So I stopped going, but what really was hard was when my sister told me I couldn't be godmother to her daughter, even though we were very close. My sister felt bad about it but it couldn't be helped.

### *Considering the Children*

Many of us found difficulties in coming out to our children, although most of us received supportive responses from them, especially if they were adults themselves at the time. The impact on younger children tended to be effected by what else was going on in the family, whether a marriage was being ended, and whether or not a new partner was being introduced into the child's life. Adolescent girls frequently had concerns with what implications their mother's sexuality had for their own. Dianne and Fleur provide examples of the range of complicating factors women with younger children had to deal with:

DIANNE: Well, it's hard to separate things out. It was a very traumatic time for all of us, and my lesbian partner was very strong...almost rigid...so that was difficult with him being the only boy, so I think he found it extraordinarily charged. He was only about thirteen, so the trauma of the incest (with the father), and the family splitting up in such an awful way...he undoubtedly went through a major crisis through the whole thing. But in fact now he's quite accepting. So he had the hardest time...and perhaps the third daughter too, because she was heterosexual. Both her sisters were lesbians. I think she felt a lot of pressure, and she's in love now for the first time, and I'm really enjoying that. And I think she's been relieved to see that that was equally acceptable.

FLEUR: Telling my kids was the hardest bit. My older daughter had a lot of problems with it... And she ended up chucking school, and living with my mother for a year. But she got over it. It's like it never happened, actually. I think because she was just starting to come to terms with her own sexuality she didn't want mine in her face. She actually said to me one time, 'If you're gay, does that mean we're all going to be gay?' I said, 'How do I know. I didn't know I was gay until I was thirty-something. And she's like, 'I could go on happily for a long time and then all of a sudden I'm going to go through all this rubbish.' She worked it out by ignoring it for years. I do not hide who I am. I don't. And she'd bring home

friends, and not tell me she was bringing them and not tell them I was gay, and they'd walk in on me kissing my girlfriend in the kitchen and suddenly I would have to deal with her friends rather than her having to deal with them. And I think she thought that was justice. 'You put me in this, you fix it.' (laughter) Whereas, my other daughter would tell friends before they came to our place, 'My mother is a lesbian, and if you have a problem with that *you* have a problem'. And my son just goes, 'Yeah, my mum will be off with her girlfriend but don't worry about it.' So it's like, they all handled it very differently according to their nature.

We all tended to agree that our children responded in ways that were typical for their personalities, positions in the family and sometimes gender.

MARGOT: Oh, I think my family in general has always thought I was...a little crazy (laughs) and this was just...fuel for the fire. But my daughter's very...relaxed about the whole thing. She was eighteen and already away at college when I first appeared with my woman lover, and you know, she just took everything in her stride. My son was about thirteen when this happened, and I think it was more difficult for him. A thirteen-year-old boy doesn't want to think about his mother being sexual...at all, at *all*.

SUSAN: I want my kids also to be broadminded... to be knowledgeable about all aspects of life...And now the elder child, he's more conservative and reserved about all those issues around sexuality ...at nineteen there's no sense of him as a sexual person at all...um...whereas the one who's fourteen – you know, he was four when his mum and dad came out to him – he came to gay pride this year ...and he's quite enthusiastic about queer life. And my daughter who's seventeen, she's sort of grown up with a more political life, I suppose. She would choose to go to rallies and things with her girlfriends and at one stage there were five of them, and they called themselves DOGMA ...daughters of gay mothers.... So her experience of gay life is broad, and now she's quite comfortable. She

suggested to me that you know, she felt some attraction to a friend of hers, and I didn't want to make a big deal of it – I said we're attracted to human beings. So they've each had a very different experience.

VALERIE: My little five-year-old grand-daughter who is now seventeen...she had a tantrum. She said her mother was a lesbian, and her auntie was a lesbian, and she was *not* going to have a lesbian for a nanna (laughter) because it just plain wasn't fair. At *five!*

We discussed the difficulties of juggling the often-competing demands of motherhood and partnership. These difficulties are certainly not exclusive to women in lesbian relationships, but for many of us this was a painful issue inseparable from any recollection of coming out to our children. The participants tended to agree that there was more potential for problems in relationships with women who didn't have children themselves. Feelings ran high in numerous accounts of partners who had not been able to understand the bond these women had with their children.

SUSAN: It's hard to separate out what was the lesbian aspect and what was the reaction to my partner, because the partner I had was probably the right one for me at that point in time, but I don't think she was a good person for my kids. [She] was very jealous too. Extraordinarily jealous and very rigid, and...highly qualified and extraordinarily gifted school teacher, who thought that school was the same as home.

TANIA: My first priority is to my child. It was a major issue in my most recent relationship. It was a source of tension and jealousy for my partner and it was stressful for my daughter. My partner didn't understand that I had no choice but to put my child first.

DIANNE: People who haven't had children think [it's] challenging, to accept that you can't actually give them that total interchangeable intimacy of two people

with no children. And that is a cause both for jealousy and dissent. And when you start to talk about houses and property (laughs) it's extraordinarily difficult.

A couple of us felt that the situation was made even more complicated if one of the children was a boy and their partner was hostile to males of any age:

SUSAN: I suppose my partner considered herself pretty much at that point a separatist lesbian, and that was interesting for me because I had two boys, and I had her coming into our household with, you know, a fair bit of rhetoric that I thought was unsuitable to bring to our house really. So I feel like that was the community I came out to...which didn't fit with me at all... I sort of felt that I could change her. Like, you know, if you want to live in this house with two boys who are just growing and hearing all of this, that's fine, but you can't say things about men that are derogatory. Because this is what they're going to live with. So it was like, either accept that this is the way we are or else you go. And in the long term she had a real shift over years, and introduced me to a queer community that I really wasn't even familiar with. But that's an interesting issue, I think, having boys.

Even for women whose children were adults there was potential for misunderstanding and resentment on the part of everyone concerned:

JENNIFER: For me it became very clear that my role as mother was immensely important...and I was not going to relinquish that role. Not that children of that age needed my mothering, but the relationship with my children is...is one of my priorities, and [it's] very solid. I have said to...perhaps would-be-partners since then, 'I come with baggage – my children. They're not negotiable.' It's tempting to think that if a relationship is going to be successful, it has to be with a woman who has children. Maybe that's not true, but I have wondered about it.

But not all relationships between mothers and women who had no children were marred by difficulties. Virginia believes her childless partner saw the late and unexpected addition of Virginia's children and grandchildren in her life as an enhancement to the relationship:

VIRGINIA: I've been very lucky. She loves the kids and they love her. I think she sees it as a bit of a second chance. Also, all her family are overseas, so she loves being part of this one. We've sometimes joked, when we've had difficulties in the relationship, about staying together for the kids.

Kimmel and Sang point out that 'lesbians who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s did not have the options of parenting in the same way that some lesbians do today' (1998:199). In one of the focus groups we had a particularly interesting discussion which took a historical perspective on lesbians and children:

TANIA: So few lesbians had children. I mean, if they were lesbians from...early. Unless you actually *became* a lesbian like I did, most of the lesbians who were lesbians all their lives and didn't marry, and didn't have children, and didn't have children inside their lesbian relationships...so...they could have gone and had sex with a man, but it wasn't part of the consciousness in the lesbian community. In fact, most lesbians rejected the notion of having children. When I talked to my friends who have never been with men, the thought of having a child was just...it wasn't part of the package, and that was not with a sense of loss for most of them. They didn't want children...So it is really only in the last ten years...there were a few, but it wasn't a big thing. There weren't the options. If you weren't in the AID program, then people didn't see it as a possibility. It was hard, and it's increasingly easier.

Between the impressionable, dependent child living at home, and the aged parents sometimes set in the ways of an earlier era, there were the grown children who had a

level of maturity that came from their own life experience, and that experience had often been gained in a relatively tolerant society. But Jennifer's story demonstrates how many interrelated factors determine whether or not children are able to be positive about what their mothers are going through:

JENNIFER: My son was twenty, and I said that I'd fallen in love with a woman. I described it like that because that's what it was...this dropping into a...just a pit of emotional, sexual turmoil...which had never happened to me in my life. He simply said, 'I knew something had happened. I hope you're happy.' My daughter, who was eighteen, but is very different...I handled it so badly. And...I told her in a place that was utterly inappropriate, and there was no space for *her*, and for some years she was very distressed and antagonistic...Mind, you, my partner wasn't always considerate...of either of the kids. Now, my daughter is twenty-seven and she couldn't be more endorsing of me. I think a number of factors have made the difference over the last nine years...and the fact that I'm no longer in that relationship, which was...not quite abusive to her, but was quite dismissive.

### *Friends*

Coming out stories often include anecdotes about the responses of friends, and we had stories both of support and of rejection. A few of us had been reluctant to tell close friends about our new relationship or status:

ANNE: The rumour mill did take care of it, and I think it was internalized homophobia on my part. But it was also fear. There was something peculiarly difficult about actually saying it. For years, when I would meet somebody, in order to get it out I would cry. It was the most extraordinary thing. I still don't really understand why that happened, but I just used to cry. So it was just easier not to do it, and to wait for word to get around.

A common experience was for us to lose touch with friends temporarily because of the initial upheaval in our lives, during which so many of us described ourselves as feeling ‘crazy’.

DENISE: There was a group that used to be friends with both of us and he (the husband) hung onto them more. And I think I was so busy...I think I also dropped some friends to an extent. There wasn't time (laughs). There actually wasn't time for them, which is a terrible thing. (pause) They've been kind enough to come back, but they just knew I was out of my head with crazy stuff so they ... well, I know I didn't lose anything because of coming out.

BECKY: I actually had a bit of a gap. When I first got into a relationship...before I told them about [her] there were people I'd been very close to, people who'd been supporting me through the pretty revolting separation I had... They said they'd actually wondered what on earth was going on...In those first few months I think I was a bit off the planet and I really did lose touch with my friends, but I certainly have re-established all those relationships.

We discussed whether or not the shift had meant that some of us never did re-establish the old friendships we'd had when we lived heterosexual lives. This had happened to some of us for a number of reasons. The presence of a woman partner in our lives, especially if she had identified early as a lesbian, very often hurled us into a whole new social network. We tended to take on her friends, and again, this happened for different reasons. Some of us found the idea of mixing with other lesbians exciting proof of our entry into a new life and a new world. Some of us felt we were more likely to have our new relationship sanctioned by our partner's lesbian friends than by our old heterosexual friends. Those friends may have been dealing with homophobic feelings, or have had lingering attachments to our male ex-partners, or we might have just imagined this sort of dilemma for them and felt uncomfortable ourselves. Some of us, with or without

partners, deliberately sought out other lesbians for acceptance, commonality, even a kind of mentoring:

JANE: I suppose there was sort of a lesbian community...new people I met through my partner that...what they had in common was that they were lesbian...or political friends, feminists, green connections. I'd known the feminists and greens before, but she was always more of an activist than I was. I sort of got more involved in those activities. I suppose you always do change your activities with a new partner. You have a bit of a cultural shift.

VIRGINIA: I think that I was so curious about what was happening with me that I just wanted to be around lesbians all the time and ask them questions. (laughter) Oh, dear, I was so boring. I was really evangelical about it... and so I got new friends.

NORA: Initially we actually did seek out lesbians, when we needed people who actually had something in common ... and also because, you know, you're in that sort of full flood of passion, it's much more amusing really.

BECKY: When we first were in a relationship we actually ...I suppose because you're struggling to adjust to something new, you're actually seeking some kind of common ground with other people who can understand where you are.

### ***Who Can You Talk To?***

Most of us admitted seeking that 'common ground'. But the search for understanding sometimes led to a bewildering awareness of our difference from other women who had become lesbians at an earlier age. Their experience was not our experience, their history was not our history, their sore spots not ours. Some of us were naïve about this

difference, and unintentionally gave offence to lesbian friends by breaking a taboo we didn't know existed:

JANE: You have to be a bit careful. There are sometimes sensitivities you don't know anything about, because you haven't had to fight the same battles.

ANNE: It took her friends a while to accept me. I didn't know it, but I gather that there are a whole range of heterosexual women who have little flirtations... A bit of sightseeing, and then they piss off. Her friends were just concerned for her that I wasn't for real. And once I had left my husband and gone to live with her, people were more accepting.

And others felt they would probably never gain total acceptance from other, long-time lesbians. Simply deciding to identify as lesbian, or having a woman for a partner, was not always going to be enough to bridge the gap:

MEL: Well, I think it's probably quite complex why I don't like [mixing with lesbians]. I think probably I feel a fraud. I don't relate...Yeah, well, I'm not really a lesbian, am I? (pause) If I talk about all those ones who've known all their lives they're lesbian, I don't fit in there...I just don't seem to fit in. I think that's probably the story of my life.

Language held many traps for the uninitiated. For long-time lesbians, who had for decades been painfully aware of the connection between words, discrimination and the oppression of sexual minorities, language was a political tool, or a weapon. Many of us had had the luxury of not needing to think before about politically correct speech. This meant we sometimes blundered into situations where we appeared insensitive to early-identified lesbians.

Some of us, desperate to talk about this new stage in our life, found we had to be careful about whom we confided in. Whether with old straight friends or new lesbian friends, we went through a period of learning what was permissible to say:

VIRGINIA: Suddenly I wasn't married any more. It was so sudden, and so huge for me. I would have loved to have somebody to talk to. I had a lot of friends who were lesbians, but they weren't really interested in me talking about my straight life. They'd more or less made the decision about themselves quite early. So I didn't actually know anyone else who had lived for such a long time as a happily heterosexual woman, and ...I was going through some emotional stuff they couldn't identify with. And neither could my straight friends. I had a pretty easy time of it really. But I would have loved somebody to talk to.

### **Journal Entry**

*The metaphor of dancing has been very useful in helping me conceptualise the intricate social maneuvering I've had to do with friends. My family has long-established ways of dealing with conflict. Habit means everyone knows where to put their feet. And with partners – well, we just make up our own steps around difficult issues. Emotion is not embarrassing, passion, including yelling, is permissible and it's impossible to pretend nothing is wrong when it is. Even when one of us steps backward, the other steps forward. Our toes might get trod on, but we still have our arms around each other.*

*It's been my friendships that trip me up. When there's an uncomfortable issue, nobody wants to lead. There don't seem to be any rules, but nobody trusts improvisation.*

*Techniques that work (more or less) with families and lovers seem overly intense and inappropriate with friends. I really hate those awkward moments, that polite tension.*

### *When is a 'Girlfriend' Just a Girlfriend?*

Some of us had difficulty with the new etiquette around socialising. There were so many things to learn and unlearn in our dealings with old friends, both male and female, the families of old friends, new acquaintances, new lesbian acquaintances, and various combinations of the above. The lessons were sometimes very hard. Many of them had to do with invisible or shifted boundaries:

ANNE: My partner was my best friend. But I do remember saying to somebody, 'I don't know who to talk to when things go wrong. There is no one to talk to because my friends are her friends and I don't have anyone for myself.' So yeah, that was difficult, very difficult... And it will be interesting to see in my new relationship who I will talk to. Because [my partner] is good at making friends and she's making friends with *my* friends. I mean, she's good at checking it out. She says, 'Is this okay with you?' And it is, but I do think...what happens, who do I speak to when I need to? You know, it is important to keep some people for yourself...It's a tricky thing... because you want that person to like your partner, but (laughs) not so much that they become a friend of hers.

VIRGINIA: I actually found that one of the most difficult things for myself, and I'm still not sure I've figured it out exactly, is the friendship thing. Because there were certain things you didn't even have to discuss when you lived with a man. Like he'd never want to come for a coffee with me after he'd met the woman who had been there with her partner for dinner a few weeks earlier. He liked her then, but he doesn't care about her now. But with a woman partner I found it difficult to know what the rules were. That was one of the big things for me. Because once upon a time I guess I expected it to be all us girls together all the time. I thought, You like her, I like her, we all like her, she likes us, what's the problem, lets all go together. And I didn't realize that you need one person who's just for you. Or that your friends will sometimes want to see you outside of a couple.

Some of us encountered problems with old heterosexual women friends who either felt personally threatened when they discovered we were attracted to women, or who felt insulted when they discovered they had nothing to feel threatened about:

JANE: I went to stay with a very good and intimate old friend whose marriage was in serious trouble, and she did her best to seduce me. And it was difficult to ...to extricate myself without causing offence. I said, 'Look, I love you, as a friend. And we are old friends. I don't want to spoil that. But just because I live with a woman doesn't mean that I would wish to be sexual with every woman I meet, however much I like them.' I also said, 'I'm in a relationship, and I wish to remain faithful, and that's no different whether you're in a heterosexual or a homosexual relationship.' It probably wouldn't have happened if she hadn't been in a bad marriage and feeling bad about herself. Although it may have. Who knows. Because there's a misconception that if you are attracted to women you're attracted to *all* women, which is ridiculous, because they wouldn't expect you to be attracted to all men.

FLEUR: One friend in particular who I was very close to, and that I had talked all these issues through with, actually became unbelievably threatened by me when I did come out as a lesbian.

Some of us had straight friends who were afraid they'd be made redundant by our new partner. They thought that our having a woman partner meant we would no longer need close women friends:

DENISE: Another thing was that two close friends were threatened by me having a woman partner because they expected her to be my new best friend. One refused to talk about it, but the other came out and said, 'What do you need me for?' They just didn't get it, that you still need other women for friends, like you always did.

We discussed our situations regarding friends and networks today, some years after our coming out. The responses varied widely, ranging from women who had exclusively lesbian circles to those with predominantly heterosexual ones. For many, their friendship circles reflected commonalities other than sexual orientation, such as still being responsible for children, or careers. But several women spoke with a hint of ambivalence, or even regret about the absence of a lesbian community:

BECKY: I think one of the things that's changed, that's made me feel less powerful within the relationship is that we spend very little time with lesbians now. and I think as you settle in your other friendships sort of reassert themselves, because you can't dispense with a friendship you've had for a long time – well I can't – and the people who are important to me are mostly heterosexual. I think spending more time with them has actually eroded that sense of ...I don't know...power...joy. You know that thing about being with lots of other women (*general agreement noises*) and enjoying the same thing.

MARNIE: I don't think we have a big enough network of lesbian friends – close lesbian friends. I think our friends are based on whether or not they have kids, and their political beliefs... I would enjoy having more lesbian friendships [but] I would prefer lesbians who had kids. I don't know why, but I have difficulty with lesbians who haven't had kids. I can't explain it. There seems to be an enormous gap for me. So I'd rather have women who are heterosexual with kids as friends.

JENNIFER: My friends are almost half and half lesbian and straight women. I've certainly lost a lot of the friends that I had when I was living in the suburbs and married with children, but I don't feel a secure member of a lesbian community.

TANIA: I don't actually know what the lesbian community *is*. I haven't been with a group of this many lesbians for years. (laughter) No, truly. I always have someone around...a partner, a lover who's a woman, who's in my life for a time. But still, I guess I don't hang out. And I think it's probably an age thing. Because

at my age most lesbians are in long term relationships, and ...so, you know, you don't want to hang around on the edge with other couples. I don't know...my group of friends is just mixed.

SUSAN: I know many lesbians who I am friendly with – there are some that I'm very close with – but I'd say that as many of my close friends are heterosexual as lesbian, and I don't feel like I belong to a community.

Later in this chapter I look at the existence and importance of something called a 'lesbian community', and whether or not the women in this study want, or can ever have, full membership in that group.

### ***Coming Out at Work***

**Possible discrimination against the lesbian as a woman must be considered as well as that based on sexuality. In coming out at work, type of job and work environment are pertinent too.**

**Laura Markowe (1996:7)**

Markowe acknowledges the widespread assumption that 'one's private life has nothing to do with work and must be kept separate', but she argues that there is increasing evidence that 'gender and sexuality have an impact within the work environment that cannot be ignored (1996:43).

Most of the women in the study derived much of their identity from their work. Fortunately, the majority of us were out to our co-workers, and considered the work environment one where we didn't have to be on guard against prejudice and discrimination, and where our colleagues were also our friends. This may indicate a limitation of the study. Because I found all my contributors through word of mouth, it was inevitable that they moved in overlapping circles, especially in their careers. Only once did I have two women in a focus group discover they actually worked for the same

institution (though they had never met each other). However we did tend to cluster in several career areas that included academia and teaching, public service or social work, health and related therapeutic professions. Our jobs were more often than not in woman-friendly and lesbian-friendly environments. Only two women felt their specific jobs - health professional and primary school teacher - made coming out potentially risky. They were sensitive to societal concerns about the power imbalances between health professional and client, and about anyone working with children. Fleur and Jane had other reasons for choosing to keep a demarcation line between their private and professional lives:

FLEUR: It's almost a definition for me about whether I consider somebody a friend. In the work place I'll tell someone if I started feeling that I liked them; otherwise I think it's none of their business.

JANE: It wasn't something that came up, really. I didn't have colleagues who were also close friends. I'd started a new job in fact. I think it just took some time for me to feel that I wanted to involve my partner in social events at work...and I'm not sure that there would necessarily be any difference with a male partner. I'm quite a private person. And for the most part I didn't know about their private lives either. Discussion was on quite a superficial level. (pause) I guess it did make a difference that my partner was a woman, because that would have caused a great deal more comment. And it was comment I wasn't ready for. It wasn't a wish not to acknowledge her. I don't mind people I know talking about me...And I suppose I had a concept of my profession as being quite conservative.

For all of us there had been a point in our transition, usually early on, when our lives were in a state of upheaval. This was most often complicated by a new lesbian relationship and sometimes we were also finishing a heterosexual relationship. At this point some of us relied on work to provide us with the stability and continuity that was missing in our private lives. But others experienced work as an extra pressure, especially

in the early days. Anne pointed out that even supportive colleagues sometimes were inadequate when a relationship ended:

ANNE: And it was also having to keep going to work. Having to keep all that together. I was in utter turmoil. And if I'd been married, it would have somehow been more legitimate to take a couple of weeks off work to get over it. But I never felt like I could do that, you know. So I just had to keep on going. And I don't think...the normal social mores don't apply if you're in a homosexual relationship. Or people don't know what the mores are...When a marriage breaks up, it's kind of visible. But it seemed to me that when a lesbian relationship broke up, there was no kind of recognition, or support.

### *Property Values*

*Nextdoor is watching us between the palings.*

*It's easy to see through since he poisoned the bougainvillea.*

*He's out there now in the purple dusk,*

*his little eyes glazed with fever.*

*Nextdoor hates the way we've let things go –*

*the passion fruit, the morning glory, the willow, the roses,  
everything spreading, grasping, tangling.*

*On his side are pelargoniums in concrete tubs.*

*They keep their legs together, their elbows off the table.*

*His nature strip is shaved to velvet and razor edged.*

*He wishes it never had to touch our hairy verge,*

*sticky with dropped cherry plums,*

*the crazy daisies reaching*

*unpruned arms across the footpath.*

*He's watching us from the centre of a heat*

*so fierce that hours of standing at the fence*

*with his hose held over the chrysanthemums  
have done nothing to cool him down.  
Nextdoor hates us waving,  
hates when we surprise him at the mailbox.  
Most of all he hates our backporch laughter  
on these hot nights.  
It's been dark for a while,  
but we can hear his pupils dilating.  
We can smell him stewing over there.*

\*

### ***Homophobia***

All of us were aware of negative stereotypes of lesbians, and the thought of having those stereotypes applied to us for the first time at this stage in our life was more difficult for some than for others. Our ability to face possible hostility or dismissal by another person depended on numerous factors: whether the person judging us was important to us, how much we feared private or public humiliation, whether or not we felt at risk socially, professionally or even physically, and our readiness to be labeled. Another factor was the extent to which we were comfortable within ourselves. Some of us did have bad experiences with total strangers in public places, or privately among people we thought were close to us. And some of us discovered internalised prejudice.

DIANNE: I wasn't ready to tell people. I was having trouble dealing with being this way myself, and I'd had so much rejection up in Queensland. Like my girlfriend who used to live next door, her husband threw me out of the house because of it. 'Get out of the house, you lesbian!' And it was just horrible, how I was treated. And I know what rejection is like, because once I told everybody, they weren't too happy with it. And it took my dad ages, years.

LAURA: I only wish that we could go down the street holding each others' hand and feeling comfortable about doing it... because you either get laughed at or picked at, or somebody will yell out, 'Which one's the boy?' We used to walk a fair bit down to Kensington...and it's quite a gay-friendly community there...but I remember we walked through the back streets and we were holding hands because no one was around, because we're pretty smoochy anyway...and bugger me dead, a double story place, this guy yells out, 'Arh, ya lesbians'. And I went (groaning noise). It's like, so derogatory. It's how he said it. Like with anything, it's how you say something.

NATALIE: When you were talking about people making rude comments, I suppose I have to bring up the fact that...well, my partner's quite distinctly different and quite masculine in her femininity. She's very tall and she's very big, and she wears men's clothing mostly because she can't be comfortable in female dresses. In fact she'd look like she was in drag if she was in a dress. So we're in the supermarket, and we get people sort of standing, and then they'll walk all the way around like that, and look. And I get really embarrassed and angry. Then I'll end up embarrassing my partner because I'll walk down the supermarket and I'll look at the person the same way they looked at us. I can't help it. Or they'll say, 'You're in the wrong toilet' to her. And she'll say, 'I've got boobs!' And then they look embarrassed. She sort of throws it off, but I still have difficulty with it... people do kind of notice you...On my own, no one takes a scrap of notice. I'm kind of very mainstream. But when I walk with her it's a totally different thing. And sometimes I have to say I'm embarrassed. And angry, and it hurts, and I hate to see her hurting, because she knows that I'm feeling sort of uncomfortable. But you get more used to it I guess, as you go along. You can cope.

ANNE: It was just a gradual awareness, I think. I'd always thought I was very liberal. I can remember discovering some vaguely racist attitudes in myself, and being really shocked. And I think this must have something of the same...in terms of thinking of lesbians as a homogenous group. And thinking of that group

of women as lesbians first, and everything else they are second. The minute you do that it's...you know...it's the beginnings of homophobia, isn't it.

Some of us dealt with our fears by refusing to mark ourselves as lesbians, although fear was not the only determinant.

### ***Public Image, Political Statement***

**What you wear, how you wear it and your demeanour while wearing it may signal that you are a dyke to the world, or only to a small section of the lesbian world. Alternatively, you can hone your image into a sartorial mixed message, and there are a seemingly infinite number of ways to keep the public guessing. It is about indicating your membership in the club, on the team.**

**Ainley (1995:130)**

### **Journal entry, December, 1998**

*... walking around the shopping centre today, I am so conscious of the image. Sometimes I feel like a walking advertisement. I feel like something's taken me over. I don't know if I'm being paranoid. I've never worried too much about the assumptions people would make about who I was based on what I wore and how I did my hair. Image had to do with: money, trendiness, size, more recently, age - but not sexual orientation. Is the way I look suddenly a vulnerability, an indication of more than I want to say outright? Also, I really could do with subscribing to Lesbiana, but I'm embarrassed in front of the postman. All these things that tell strangers things about me that they didn't need to know before.*

Explaining his theory of adult development, Levinson argues that a woman in a mid-life transition from straight to lesbian may be forced to relinquish attitudes and institutions which she has previously taken for granted, and replace them with a new 'life structure'

and a new self-concept as a lesbian or bisexual person (Reid, 1998:219 citing Levinson, 1986:6). One aspect of this new structure and sense of self may be an unprecedented political framework within which to make sense of her life, including her sexuality. She may not have had a political intention initially, but Rich argues, 'There is a *nascent* feminist political content in the act of choosing a woman lover or life partner in the face of institutionalized heterosexuality' (ibid:659). Depending on the woman's values and mores, and those of the culture she comes out into, she may see herself for the first time in her life as a sexual outlaw.

### **Journal, September, 2000**

*What's important to me is that I don't deny who I am or who my partner is, or how I live my life. I do want straight people to know that some lesbians look like me and act like me. But temperamentally, I am not happy about being stared at, and never have been. I'm quite self-conscious. I wouldn't deliberately do something to call attention to myself. That may sound odd because I'm often in the public eye professionally, but for some reason that's different. There's a bit of a contradiction here, because I realize that lesbian invisibility is not a good thing, and yet personally – nothing to do with being a lesbian – invisibility has its advantages. I've actually enjoyed that aspect of getting older. I know it bugs some women, but for me it's like a new freedom. Nobody takes the slightest notice of me unless I want them to.*

*I've been aware of thinking...wondering...if I get a haircut will I look like a lesbian. When I was living as a heterosexual woman I could cut my hair and it didn't **mean** anything. But I was aware, especially in the beginning, of not wanting to do anything at all to myself that people could watch and say, there she goes, turning into a lesbian. I didn't want to frighten the horses with sudden moves. I felt people were watching to see how this change might manifest itself. I didn't want to be anybody's stereotype. I didn't want my loved ones to think I'd changed more than I had. Maybe I was just trying to hold onto some sense for myself that I was still the same person.*

*I can remember A. talking years ago about the admiration she felt for the outrageous queens and the very masculine dykes because, she said, 'They took the flak for the rest of us.' I didn't understand it at the time, but I do now.*

Some of us struggled with how best to present ourselves to the heterosexual public, and to the lesbian community. Did we want to be marked for easy identification by either? For some of us, marking ourselves by appearance, behaviour or association might have required a change in personal style that we avoided, not because it kept us safe, but because it felt inauthentic. We discussed the extent to which we wanted to represent a stigmatised minority, and whether the image we presented to the world underwent any perceptible adjustments? Denise admitted that she found it exciting in the beginning to play around with clothing and jewellery that would send messages to other lesbians. Virginia had worried that her children would think she was a 'different person' if her appearance changed. Several of us talked about feeling required to renounce the trappings of heterosexual femininity even if we liked them.

TANIA: That's been the hardest thing for me... when you talk about feeling secure in the lesbian community... I had trouble because I love soft, sensual clothes. I love scarves and silk shirts. I used to love having my hair done. I love fingernail polish...and I love makeup. I just wear it for its own sake, because I enjoy it. And I feel like if there's anything I'm judged about, that's [it]. The only time I feel really safe in the lesbian community is at the Silk and Satin Ball. And I love it. I love it. I have dinner parties where I ask everybody to come dressed up, because it gives me a chance to wear things...I have clothes in my wardrobe that I never wear. And I keep them there because one day I might need a pair of red silk pyjamas.

DIANNE: [My partner] didn't like any of that heterosexual stuff...nail polish or lipstick...and in a way neither did I, but I was very reluctant to go back to the plain me...straight brown hair and freckles. (laughs) Now, if I want to dye my hair

red I'll do it, because I want to adorn myself, not because I want to look like a heterosexual girl. Either it's an artistic, creative thing, or I just want to dress up. But [it] took a long time to come through to a point of reclaiming that.

Some of us also felt strongly that our appearance and behaviour was a public political statement as well as a reflection of personal preference:

SANDRA: I feel as if I'm a role model. I go to lots of lengths to seduce people. I don't tell people I'm a lesbian [until] after they get to know me, and I've already got them, and what can they do with that, because their idea of a lesbian is some bloody woman in a suit who wants to be a man. I don't want to be any of those things. We have to be seen. Otherwise...we're just a minority group of people who hate men, and we've got no sense of humour.

DENISE: I think that's about the way lesbians occupy space, the way they don't flutter their eyelashes...I can sit on a train and spot the dyke. It's about being powerful in the space, the fact that you do occupy the territory and assert yourself, and I love that side of lesbianism.

### ***Passing for Straight***

#### **Journal entry, 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 2000**

*There is a protective cloak that envelops me because people assume I'm heterosexual... every curl and bit of makeup can serve as a disguise under certain circumstances... Straight people always assume other people are straight unless they look different or in some other way correct the misapprehension. So you've always got the assumption working for you if you want it. Say nothing, do nothing, and you'll pass. I confess I make it work for me. And it's so easy. I know all the little tricks to make me one of the girls. I have children's names I can drop. Of course, I would talk about my children anyway, but*

*I'm aware of how, in my new job, it gives me marks for legitimacy, points of connection...It's uncomfortable to think about, but I can say to the world 'Yes, now I choose to live with a woman but you can see that I have lived with a man in the past, so you know I know how to be a 'real woman'. I am neither a pervert nor a reject. I am unlimited, extended, adventurous, experimental, broad minded, a discoverer of secrets. You can respect this choice I've made because you can see that it is a choice.*

Many of the published accounts of women coming out as lesbians in mid life emphasise the lengths the women went to in denying their homosexuality. Markowe says,

The possibility that she might be homosexual led to immediate conflict between continuity of feelings and self-esteem, arising from perceptions of negative distinctiveness. The intra-psychic coping strategies used were denial – at the first stage i.e. denial of the fact that one occupies a threatening position; and re-evaluation of existing identity content by focusing attention on heterosexuality and giving it increased value. Continuity of lesbian feelings was sacrificed to maintain self-esteem.

(1996:164)

There is an impression given in this literature that for many women the years spent living as a heterosexual were years she spent lying to herself and others. Although Markowe does say that approximately half the nine women in her study who had heterosexual histories 'described their previous sexual relationships with men in positive terms' (1996:167). The women for whom this fault-line scenario is true tend to discount their heterosexual past in order to embrace their lesbian present. They feel they have lost a false self and gained the truth.

This conversion narrative, while it no doubt accurately reflects the experience of many women, does reinforce the binary view of sexual identities. It establishes a sort of economic framework, in which nothing can be added unless something on the other side

is subtracted, and importantly, it does not allow for the more complex stories of the participants in this study. Most of us believe that our histories are an inescapable part of who we are. Many of us value aspects of those histories and have no desire to escape them.

However, in all the groups there were discussions of the phenomenon in which a woman identifying as a lesbian nevertheless continues to trade, in some situations, on her heterosexual past in return for social acceptance and a sense of belonging. Repeatedly the women talked about their new awareness of heterosexual privilege - the ability to *not* stand out in a heterosexual crowd, to be rewarded by the dominant culture for appearing, even if passively because of silences and omissions, to be heterosexual, and consequently to not be discriminated against:

DIANNE: It took me a while to realize that it was a lot easier for me, because if I wanted to pass as straight I had children and grandchildren. And even if I didn't want to, the other people around me assumed I was straight, and I did come to see how much more accepted I was because of that. My friends who had always been lesbians didn't have that acceptance.

More than any other issue, this one had been the source of much hurt and anger amongst the women. We had perceived, and been surprised by, a degree of intolerance from some sections of the lesbian community towards us because of our heterosexual history. Jensen explains this phenomenon from the perspective of a community of lifelong lesbians:

The woman may be viewed with suspicion or, at least, reluctance because lifelong lesbian women have suffered through years of prejudice and could resent that a woman had a marriage and family and then wants to experience the benefits of a woman's community now that there is relatively more lesbian acceptance.' Most of us agreed that we had been naïve about this initially. But as time passed, we had come to see the reason behind the resentment (1999:181).

SANDRA: For me it's been a real education process... I learned how protected I was by my heterosexual history. I could go anywhere, and I had the motherhood thing. And at first I fought against this idea... because... I didn't want to be seen as taking an easy way out. But the fact is, I had that common experience with the straight people I met, and I could shift into that really easily, because it was familiar to me. I didn't like to think I was hiding, but whether you think of it as that or not, the fact is, it's there at your disposal, whereas for some women it's **not** there.

FLEUR: I can actually play it either way. I'm protected by the fact that I've been married and I've got kids, so I'm acceptable... you know, you can get away with it a bit more...whereas a lesbian who hasn't got any children is more open to being discriminated against. I'm much more acceptable than some bull dyke or something (laughter) out in the suburbs.

### *The Lesbian Life as a Possibility*

#### **Journal entry**

*Re-reading the transcript from one of the focus groups a year later I felt my anger rising over an offhand remark one of the women had made. We had been telling each other our histories, and I had said something to the effect that I was nearly 40 before I realised that you could actually have a normal life and incidentally, be a lesbian. I hadn't always known that this might have been an option for me. She obviously thought this was disingenuous. At the time I let it pass, because though I knew it was true, I didn't know how to defend that truth.*

*However, after much reading and hearing from lots of other women, I know that the way I felt was quite common. There was a real absence of lesbian models for the fairly conventional woman, an ignorance of the possibilities, the alternatives.*

*Several of the women in the groups, especially those from the country, had only the most limited understanding of what a lesbian was. It always had to do with sex, and it was always bad or crazy and usually a secret.*

*My first real-life lesbians were back in the seventies. Bra-less boiler-suited young things determined to shock in the name of women's and gay liberation. Nobody I was attracted to, or even spent enough time with to get over initial mutual aversion and distrust. Certainly nobody I could identify with. The funny thing is, now I realise that some of those women, for all their outrageous behaviour, were not actually attracted to other women. So in fact, I really didn't have anything in common with them.*

*Then in the mid-eighties I got a job in a big community arts centre, where there were so many different domestic arrangements represented among the staff that our director made up a new word for a live-in partner: The Spice. The Spice was acknowledged as the spouse, but there was also the hint of added excitement. It wasn't until this period that I saw gay men and lesbians simply getting on with their lives, not denying who they were in any way, but also not using who they were to confront other people. This was the first time I understood that being a lesbian could involve having a whole legitimate life, not just a political stance, or sexually provocative behaviour. They could have regular jobs and mortgages and they took nieces and nephews to the movies. Their sexuality was as private – not secret, private – as my own. Some were so conservative in their behaviour they made me look radical.*

Another aspect of the public face of lesbianism has to do, not with how the women presented themselves in society, but with what was presented to them. It is perhaps difficult in the twenty-first century to imagine a time when women didn't know lesbians existed. Repeatedly the focus groups heard women say that they had got married because, as Natalie reminded us, 'It's what you did back then.' And some of us only knew of stereotypes that we couldn't identify with, so for us, life as a lesbian didn't seem an option:

ROSE: No, it didn't occur to me that I had the inclination to be attracted to women. I didn't even hear the word lesbian up the country. I didn't know there were women that...and I can't even say I knew women up the country that I think, looking back now, might have been gay either. The women I knew were feminine mummies who had a home and children and did the mother's club thing and ... I was one of *them*.

NATALIE: It's interesting that it's possible to not know what you're longing for or what you're missing if you're not aware that it exists.

BRENDA: I didn't actually know there was such a thing as lesbians for a very long time, but I have to say that my emotional life had always been with women anyway, so the emotional relationships I had were with women, I just didn't know how to define that, or if it was even definable.'

FLEUR: I grew up in a very working class environment. The word lesbian was just not something you heard. I knew about gay men, but I didn't realize they had a whole lifestyle, you know. I just thought it was somebody who liked men, but they also got off with women.

VIRGINIA: I was attracted to women too, but like a few people have said, it didn't ever seem like anything but a peculiarity about me. It didn't seem like a thing that was a life choice. That you could actually do something about it in a kind of open way, that you lived that way. It seemed like a little secret that people might have.

### ***The Community***

Prior to the 1970s there was nothing which could have been called a lesbian 'community', in the sense in which that word has been used since, to denote a group

united by their marginalised status and dedicated to the mutual support of its members. Jensen (1999:180) refers to Ross's discussion of the high correlation between psychological well-being of lesbians and the degree to which they have social support from a community which positively reinforces their identity. Ideally lesbian communities provide opportunities to meet other lesbians, to feel safe from the censure of the straight world and to learn and celebrate aspects of lesbian history and culture. They also provide a united public face when one is required for social or political action. And most importantly, they provide opportunities for friendship. The women in this study had mixed feelings about the importance of belonging to a community organised around sexuality, but for some the support and validation they received from other lesbians was invaluable:

DIANNE: For me it was very important, coming from interstate where I did have a community, that I do have one here. And I know that without that I would have been bereft. I do have to identify a small group of lesbians that I see regularly. I know that they're there for me and I'm there for them. And it's about us being lesbians. Really, that's the core value, and without that I would be at a loss.

BECKY: I reckon it's hard not having a group of people, friends that you have a common language with, because there are battles, about being a minority, and being not acknowledged. But I think it's is amazing how many lesbians I've spoken to who are in exactly the same position, who say we don't have a lot of lesbian friends. If you do, you're lucky. And I think not having them tends to isolate you. It seems crazy.

Having a community waiting to receive her made everything much easier for Rose, who describes the experience as though it was a rebirth:

ROSE: Mine [shift] was instant. March, I'm heterosexual and April, I'm gay and out there with a whole new dream. And I don't know, it's just been so easy. I

couldn't believe it, I felt I'd moved into this whole new wonderful community, and I felt so comfortable in it. Like I was greased and slipped into it.

But some women questioned where, or indeed whether, they could locate themselves within a lesbian community:

JENNIFER: The woman that I fell in love with was an out and out lesbian, and had been for most of her adult life, so we were coming from very, very different positions. ...My anxiety...was about the social. As a middle-aged woman coming from a long-term marriage I felt so vulnerable in many ways. The women that I met through her were predominantly lesbians who were very politicised, most of whom had not married, and many of whom had not ever had a relationship with a man, certainly didn't have children. I felt very...very...invalid. It's something I still struggle with a bit. I can remember...we had this same discussion in a women's studies course - but it wasn't about lesbianism, it was about feminism – did women who were in marriages and had children...did they have the same sort of validity in feminism as the women who were lesbian...So for some years I was anxious and worried...not worried, unrelaxed. And it was to do with credentials and acceptability.

TANIA: Community for me is about a group of people who are in communication and touch regularly, and are there for each other...I had a community when I was first a feminist, and my CR group...I would say that was a community. It went for five years, and there was no question, we were all there for each other. We knew each other's lives in minute detail, like nobody else ever did. I don't have that in a lesbian way.

Some women described their sense of not quite being accepted initially, of even incurring hostility sometimes as a result of coming to lesbianism at a late stage. This experience is touched on earlier in this chapter under *Passing for Straight*.

ANNE: I also struggled a bit with the community...There was a sense of solidarity, of being with like-minded people. The flip side of that was that it could be exclusionary of others. I often felt that I was not politically correct. I often found that people felt it was very strange that I was still on very good terms with my ex-husband. I felt for a while that I had to prove I was a real lesbian or something. And while it was exciting, it was also a bit feverish on the edge. A lot of unhappy people it seemed to me. A lot of...while I know all the reasons why...a lot of damaged women I seemed to come across in those early days.

Jensen suggests that lifelong lesbians may approach a new lesbian with caution in case she returns to heterosexuality (1999:181). Two women in this study experienced this sort of reservation:

NATALIE: I definitely know there were issues with a lot of my partner's friends. Maybe they thought I'd hurt her. She'd been with a straight woman who after fifteen years went with a man. I think people think when you're getting close to mid life that it's just a crisis and you're just looking for a new sexual experience because perhaps you've got a bit bored... And I think that with some of my partner's friends...I had to really work to prove myself to them in some ways. And now ...I love them all and they're so nice. And we're mates, but if I had of stepped out of line they would have been in there like Flynn to support her. I wouldn't have been considered. But that was nice. I respect them for it now. You know, they thought, they were protecting their own.

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, having a lesbian partner was no guarantee of acceptance by life-long lesbians, though some of us felt it did open doors for us into the lesbian community:

MARGOT: I'd been a feminist for a long time, I had a lot of lesbian friends. But I found there was another notch that I hadn't been admitted to, and I didn't even know it existed until I was suddenly one of the girls.

ANNE: You somehow gain legitimacy because...although I'd been a feminist, I wasn't a real feminist because I had long blonde hair, I was married and I wore lipstick. (laughter) So I became more legitimate once I was living with her. And there was no doubt that *she* was a real lesbian. (laughs)

Most of us had discovered that there is no single lesbian community, but many, each with a slightly different focus, image or political stance, and there is often heated debate between these sub-cultures about the best way to be a lesbian. Still, more than one woman commented that even in a large city, many lesbians seem to know each other. One woman compared the different lesbian communities to members of a family who may squabble among themselves but will close ranks against outsiders:

MARGOT: I discovered that you had to be careful what you said because the person you were talking to was likely to have had a relationship with the person you were talking about. Either a relationship or a feud (laughs).

ANNE: [My partner] took me by the hand and led me into the lesbian *scene*. She seemed to know every lesbian in Melbourne, and she always knew everybody's history and background (laughs).

As discussed earlier, long-term lesbians often create a sense of family with their friends in the lesbian community:

JANE: I think you'd find if you asked other women who aren't close to their families, their friends are their family.

But many of the women in this study felt that their unbroken ties with their biological families diminished their need for a lesbian community:

SANDRA: They say they're the sisterhood, and I think, no you're not. I don't have that kind of feeling about them. I certainly do have a feeling about being

part of a community, but not the sisterhood. I don't like all that kind of crap. My sisters and my kids are my *real* family, and these other people aren't my real family. They're part of my life and I'm part of that group, but you know...

IRIS: I think it's different when you're in a family. You're just in a different situation, because you've got all those relationships anyway, and you don't draw on people in the community...how can I put it...your life is so busy...if you make the move late you've already established heaps of connections and networks, professional networks and so on, so that just all rolls on. And then you've got all the family responsibilities.

CYNTHIA: Probably because we don't need the support networks, and I know that's been very necessary for people who've been rejected or been unable to find things in common with their workmates... A lot of the gay people I know don't mix much with people who aren't gay. And we've talked about this. We couldn't envisage not mixing with a huge number of people. Because we're very sociable, we're extremely sociable. It would be too limiting. I find we haven't got a lot in common (with other lesbians) because we're living different lives.

These comments reflect the fact that for some women affiliation with other lesbians is not critical to their sense of wellbeing because lesbianism is not their core identity.

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***Chapter Five***

**KEEPING TIME /LEARNING NEW STEPS: AGE**

***Kitchen Dancing***

*Sometimes when no one's watching  
you close your eyes and do it like teenagers -  
that old cling and sway to something slow,  
nobody leading, making it up as you go.  
Short steps, no more than you need  
to keep from falling over.  
You think of it as a private dance,  
hardly a dance at all,  
just a couple of bodies and music,  
and this moment.  
Yet you haven't been still.  
Almost imperceptibly you've turned  
so that when you open your eyes you're surprised  
to see where your shuffling has brought you.*

\*

**Research on middle-aged gay men and lesbians today is best understood when viewed in its cultural and historical context...we must recall the context in which this cohort of gay men and lesbians constructed their identity and the beliefs they held about their lives as a result.**

**Kimmel and Sang (1995:190)**

As the title of the study suggests, initially my interest was in the age of the woman at the time she came out. I had expected that every additional adult year would add incrementally to the complications in her transition from heterosexual to lesbian life. This turned out to be true in more ways than I had anticipated.

As middle-aged women we have witnessed and been part of massive cultural shifts in attitude, discussed in Chapter 2, regarding every aspect of human life, including sexuality. We represent what has been described as ‘a pioneer generation’ by Kimmel and Sang who state, ‘It is important that this generation be studied now because their lives have spanned a unique period of history’ (1998:208).

Our ages in 2002 ranged from thirty-seven to seventy. Some of us had only recently come out as lesbians, others had identified as lesbians for over thirty years. Our collective story contains episodes that reveal both oppression and previously unthinkable openness. The difference often hinges on where our coming out slots into the historical timeline. Three women were born in the 1930s, which means they had already reached what this study is designating as middle-age at the time of the Stonewall riots, referred to in Chapter 2, which are widely believed to have heralded the birth of gay liberation. This means they developed through childhood, adolescence and adulthood ‘in a very different social climate than would prevail later in history. In those years, homosexuals were viewed as “perverted” by society, “evil” by the church, “sick” by the medical and psychiatric professions, and “criminals” by the police’ (Reid, 1998:217).

This chapter focuses on the woman’s individual coming out age, the various aspects of her life which are likely to affect it and be affected by it, and the interplay between these aspects. It is important to remember that a girl who was thirteen years old in 1960 was a

different sort of creature from a girl who turned thirteen in 1980. Even if both girls were exposed to the same societal factors, the impact of those factors would be determined to a large extent by their different ages at the time of exposure. In 1965, when I was sixteen, I watched the Beatles on television, with my mother who was thirty-nine, and my grandmother who was sixty-seven. We were all sitting in the same room, seeing the same images on the screen, hearing the same music, but were being affected quite differently by the experience.

In focus group discussions it was clear that we all understood how much depended on the social climate in which we grew up, as well as the prevailing attitudes of the era in which we came out, and that it was impossible to tell our personal stories as though we somehow lived outside the bigger story. We agreed that there is always a trading and a tension between the individual and the universal, the personal and the public. Our discussions revealed four interlinking age-related variables contributing to our experience of coming out and of establishing ourselves as lesbians:

- When we were born, that is, into what historical era.
- Our altered identities at different ages.
- Our ages at the time we came out.
- The historical era in which we came out.

## *Lesbian Visibility and Role Models*

**Women tend to become what they know they can become, based on what they see around them.**

**Jensen (1999:133)**

### **Journal entry**

*Re-reading the transcript from one of the focus groups I felt my anger rising over something one of the women said to me when I explained that I hadn't always known the world was full of lesbians living ordinary lives, and that this might have been an option for me. She obviously thought this was disingenuous. However, I realize, now I've spoken with other women, that for many of us there was a complete absence of lesbian models for the fairly conventional woman.*

In Chapter 2 I discussed the increased mainstream awareness of marginalized sexualities, often as a result of their representation in arts and popular culture. Sexual variants are visible and acceptable in contemporary western society in a way that would have been inconceivable when these women were coming to sexual maturity.

It may be difficult in the twenty-first century to imagine a time when lesbians were so hidden that it was possible for a teenage girl not to know they existed. But as we saw in Chapter 4, women who were born before the 1960s, especially those who had been isolated in the country or small towns, were often ignorant of the possibilities and the alternatives available to them. Hancock cites Coleman's 1985 study of forty-five married or formerly married lesbians/bisexual women. Coleman found that many of these women reported marrying out of choice, because they loved their husbands. He also found 'that women who later developed bisexual feelings were not likely to be aware of these feelings at the time they married' (1998:411).

Jensen and Coleman ‘concur that lesbian and bisexual women have difficulty knowing and becoming aware of their personal identity and gender orientation.’ Either because of *when* they were born, or because of where they grew to maturity, or both, this was the case for several women in this study. Some admitted they had been influenced by negative lesbian stereotypes, especially the radical lesbian feminist of the 1970s. But at least those women had *seen* a lesbian. There were others who had had no lesbian model of *any* sort:

JANE: When I was twenty I didn’t know that having a physical relationship with another woman was at all possible – I’d never heard of such a thing. I was a very naïve country girl... I absolutely cannot put myself in the space where I would have been had I realized that I was strongly attracted to another woman...

FLEUR: It wouldn’t have been even remotely possible at seventeen. And that was in part because of the good Catholic, working class, western suburbs upbringing. You didn’t see gay people in the west. Other people I’ve talked to said, oh, we had an openly gay couple living here and there...in exactly the same era...but you certainly didn’t see them in Sunshine or Braybrook. So it was at least partly about geographical location, but I think it was also about association. My family just didn’t associate with that kind of free-thinking crowd, so I just didn’t get exposed to it.

This absence of exposure to a range of women openly identifying as lesbians was critical for a number of us. And simply being aware that attraction can exist between two women is not at all the same thing as seeing examples of this attraction turned into a valid relationship between women leading unapologetic, successful, perhaps even ordinary, lives. This was true for at least two participants who had been aware of early passionate feelings towards other girls. But even when no attempt was made to conceal these feelings, they seem to have been dismissed by the young participant’s family as a phase in her process of maturing rather than as the first step on a path toward lesbian identity:

Or, social pressure and a sensitivity to negative attitudes towards same-gender attraction held them back.

VALERIE: (born 1933). I'm sixty-seven, and after the Second World War, I was about thirteen. I fell in love – it was absolutely a passion – with another little girl. I was a bit precocious, and I was reading Freud, and Freud said it was okay if you were thirteen or fourteen, but not if you were fifteen. I was very much in love with this girl,...and so I knew that...I knew something I didn't have words for. We moved to Australia in 1948, and yes, there were boyfriends. And when I was almost seventeen I met the man I married. ..It was a good marriage, and for about nineteen years of that I was typically having children and working and that sort of thing. But I kept on loving these girlfriends of mine. And I knew that I couldn't rely on Freud anymore.

BRENDA: (born 1932). My first real physical passion was with a school mate, a girl, when I was about thirteen. And then because of social pressure I started going out with boys. All the way up through college I did it because it was expected of me, but...I only enjoyed the part where you felt wanted. It was partially because the expectations were that I would marry and have children, and partially because I didn't want to take responsibility for myself. I was terrified not knowing what I would do in life, and it just seemed easy. At the time you weren't expected to get married *and* have a career. That was in the 1950s. Now I think it would be different, but then it was definitely that the man would take care of you. So I was married...twice, and my second marriage lasted seventeen years, and most of the time it was fine. But I began to feel more and more like a parasite. Women's Lib had begun, and there was a lot of talk about the liberation of claiming womanhood, and I realised that I definitely was much more attracted to the women I knew.

Jensen states that a major theme emerging from her study of women who had become lesbians in later life was the absence of life options at the time they had married. 'Over

and over, most respondents, covering the entire age span, told of the implicit expectations from family and community that they would marry a man' (1999:47). In my study, Rene had this to say:

RENE: I reckon I'd always been attracted to women. Before I got married to my husband I was engaged to another chap and I called that off because...um...I thought I was in love with another woman then, and I ...my family...I mean, I'm Jewish and 30 years ago you were expected to get married and have kids. That was just the done thing. I told everybody why I called off my engagement...and nobody believed me. I told the man, I told my family, I told everybody. And because nobody liked the man, I think they just used it as an excuse to get rid of him. (laughter) And it was weird. So I thought, well, maybe I'm...mistaken. Anyway, about six months later I met my late husband and got married and to this day I don't know why I did, because I always knew I was gay. I mean, I don't regret being married for the two lovely kids. And I don't think my poor husband had a particularly good time. The marriage was never really great guns, because I guess my heart wasn't in it.

A number of us had become young adults in the 1970s, and several cited the liberal spirit of those times as a major influence on our attitudes towards sexuality. For one there was the suggestion that her sexual experimentation may actually have blinded her to her preference for other women:

FLEUR: I had slept with a woman when I was in my very early twenties, but that was kind of like...there was me and him and her and it actually never occurred to me that it was okay to just sleep with her. (laughter) It didn't. It never occurred to me. I just thought that ...I mean, we are talking the early 1970s here and man, there was an awful lot of that going on anyway. There was a lot of sexual experimentation all around me.

For others the new tolerance for experimentation allowed them to act on earlier fantasies:

VALERIE: There was something in the back of my mind which just left there. And then came the sexual revolution. And all of a sudden I was in the middle of the sexual revolution, and I don't want to go into detail, but it was certainly a very different time for me. There was an awful lot of sex with a lot of people. And then of course, the sexual revolution was only a year before I discovered feminism.

Some people may find it hard to believe that a woman can marry without any insight into her potential for same-sex relationships. But as Jensen says of the women in her study on coming out in later life after marriage,

The women did not know because their experiences, their role models, and the "available social constructs" (Rust, 1993:68) had not allowed them to know. The greater awareness by younger women appears to be a reflection of the gradually heightening social awareness of the presence of gays/lesbians/bisexuals over the last ten years and the concomitant increase in role models and available social constructs (1999:154).

### *Changes in Identity Over Time*

**The general assumption of society is that we have one preferred mode of being. Yet, we all have different discourses of identity – and our identity is constantly shifting, as a temporary construction linked to our ageing.**

**Jude Noble (2002:20)**

### **Journal entry**

*Sometimes I wonder what my parents would have thought if they could see me now. I seem to have lived several lifetimes in fifty years. I spent at least thirty of those years just*

*trying not to stand out in a crowd, to do what other people did, to be respectable. I think I was not so much conservative, as deeply conventional. And very scared. The last thing in the world I wanted was to call attention to myself for being different, much less controversial or offensive. I was the shy girl beneath the showoff, always careful to make the show a popular one. I was also the keeper of many secrets. You have to be when acceptability is so important to you. I reckon I was forty before I stopped caring so much what other people thought and started putting some value on my uniqueness – when I became aware of having outgrown some of those old descriptions of myself. When I stopped holding myself back from all sorts of things. But I can't remember anything that prepared me for what I am now: a middle-aged woman living openly with another woman and a writer writing about the experience.*

Jensen, in discussing Rust's explanation for why it may have taken some women a long time to discover lesbian leanings, notes that Rust also takes into account the social construction model of identity, and the fact that 'individuals often switch back and forth between sexual identities and experience periods of ambivalence, during which they wonder about their sexual identities' (Jensen citing Rust, 1999:108). Jensen concedes:

Rust appears to be saying that a woman may find that changes in her sexual identity or gender orientation may be necessary to describe accurately her experience in her particular social context. That is, the conceptualization of same-gender attraction has changed from the pejorative category of the past to a category in the 1990s that has many social and political meanings (ibid:108).

The two major theories on identity are essentialism and constructionism, the sources of the born versus made debate. Celia Kitzinger compares essentialist theory, which assumes that 'there are objective, intrinsic, culture-independent facts about what a person's sexual orientation is', with the theory of social construction, which argues that 'humans have no basic, fundamental sexual nature that is transhistorical and transcultural, and to which labels such as "hetero," "homo" and "bi" can unproblematically be applied.'

(Kitzinger, 1998:140, quoting Stein, 1990:4-5). And she quotes Gagnon on his 'script theory', central to which is the assumption that

Sex is not an instinctive force or biological drive, controlled by inner psychic forces or hormonal fluctuations, but rather a social construct, regulated by 'sexual scripts'. Unlike drives, which are fixed essences destined to seek particular expression, 'scripts' can be highly variable and fluid, subject to constant revision and editing (1998:140 quoting Gagnon, 1977).

Earlier in this chapter I cited Jensen's finding that lesbian and bisexual women have difficulty knowing their identity and gender orientation. My findings seem to be saying something slightly different. There was only one woman in this study whose attraction to another woman took her completely by surprise, and one who married knowing she was 'gay'. The others either pushed aside early warnings, or acknowledged them privately and chose whether to act on them or not while identifying publicly as heterosexual. There is no doubt that the absence of lesbian role models and the heteronormative pressure of society greatly influenced the choices these women made. But their stories don't all support the essentialist idea of a knowable identity, ie a true and unchanging one. Instead, many of them appear to be describing a process of building, altering, discarding and rebuilding identities, much more along the lines Kitzinger and Gagnon proffer.

While the debate still rages, it is these constructionist notions of the cultural and historical relativity of sexual identity, together with its 'constant revision', which are of particular interest in this study. For many of us, there seems to have been no sense of ourselves as living inauthentic lives before becoming lesbians:

JANE: You've tried out a whole variety of roles through your life...professional, personal, whatever...and one more role doesn't seem much trouble, whereas when you're twenty that role might seem like it will take over your whole life and be all that you are. Maybe when you're fifty being a lesbian's not such a big deal. It's only one thing among many things. Whereas when you're twenty it's one

thing out of three or two, and it seems huge. Also you're aware at fifty that life doesn't have to be such a big drama, that the next year... five years... who knows what's going to happen.

Heterosexual women traditionally mark middle-age from the time their children leave home. 'Women whose whole lives have been orientated around care-taking and performing the role of the "other" have begun to search for their own identity, separate from children and husbands' (Junge and Mayer 1985; Rubin, 1979 in Kimmel and Sang, 1998:193).

Some of us had the occasional fantasy or attraction to another woman stored away in a secret place while we got on with the life we *were* living. Others had no secrets to store, and one was taken completely unaware by the first undeniable attraction. Some of us were happy with our lot, or too busy with children or careers to think much about it. Some of us chided ourselves for not being normal, or satisfied with what we had. Others were plagued with a nagging sense of something important being missing. But *all* of us believe now that timing, that is, the stage of our lives that we chose to come out, was a critical factor in our re-making ourselves into women who were also lesbians:

DENISE: It was timing as well. It's very interesting that at the time I went for the [other] woman...you know, I was changing my life because I wanted to be with that woman. But it *wasn't* that. I was changing my life to live a different kind of life...there was more...autonomy, and there was more assertion about it, and there was more sense of identity. Because while I had my kids, and I just adored them...there's no way I would have left that marriage while they were little.

CYNTHIA: I remember [my partner] said to me ...that she'd hoped to find that soul mate, and at the age of fifty-four she'd thought, well obviously I'm not meant to find that person. And then at fifty-five she did, just on her birthday. And I think for both of us there was the sense that it had started later than we'd hoped, but we also kept saying how really mature we could be. We never could have had

this depth or richness in a relationship. I know I couldn't have had it even three years beforehand.

VIRGINIA: I've just chopped off what I now see was a brief but pretty important earlier episode. A warning maybe, or one of those ambiguities that I now realize is quite common. Loved the husband, liked the woman, got mad at the husband, went to the woman, missed the husband, went back to the husband, nobody knew. So I didn't count it.

ELISABETH: My partner often says, I wish I'd known you when you were younger, I would have been in love with you. And I say I was such a different person, you probably would have thought I was the most boring, conventional thing, you know. It just would not have happened.' (laughter)...

Only Rene, who had been propelled into marriage at seventeen after declaring her love for her best girlfriend, spoke of her heterosexual years as wasted, and even she admitted that she would not have wanted a life without her children. Instead of regretting our earlier lives, most of us not only valued them, but felt they had given us a sense of perspective about ourselves, gained from wide-ranging experience. In turn, this perspective made some of us unwilling now to use narrow descriptions of ourselves based on our sexuality:

JENNIFER: Even now, if I were asked to describe myself starting from the essentials, I would say something like, I am woman, and I am a mother, and I am lesbian. It [lesbian] is not my first identifier. Or Australian might be in there.

### *Older Women, New Relationships*

**Once we are past menopause we are all oddballs. We need feel no embarrassment about looking for relationships that do not follow the accepted paradigm.**

**Germaine Greer (1991:437)**

Not all of us were past menopause when we embarked on a first openly lesbian relationship. But many of us admitted having had comments made to us, often by heterosexual women friends, to the effect that they sometimes wished they could be attracted to other women given the diminishing field of available, able-bodied men. Some of us felt this implied that we had become lesbians in midlife by default. It was therefore disconcerting to read an article in the *Sunday Herald Sun* which had this quote from Jack Carney, a spokesperson for Relationships Australia:

As they [women] get over 60, opportunities to get a man diminish substantially. Men marry younger women and they die about eight years younger, so there is a real male shortage...And as women get even older it gets much worse, so we ask them to entertain the idea of lesbian relationships (Voss and Cox, 10<sup>th</sup> August, 2003).

As shown earlier, timing was important, and many women stated that they had not been ready to make the transition to lesbianism until they were older, but their reasons for transiting, when they did, had nothing to do with the availability of men. In fact men had nothing to do with the decisions at all, except once in the most tenuous way, as Nora explains:

NORA: I decided when I was about fifteen that if I was unmarried by the time I was thirty-five I would seriously consider having a child on my own. So thirty-five was coming...I'd had a series of unsatisfying relationships with men. I had fantasized about women since I could remember, and I thought, stuff it. It's time to let go of this shit and try your fantasy. So that's what I did.

There was a two-way street between age and action. Many of us insisted we could not have crossed the sexual border until we had first crossed the territory from youth into middle age. But it was also true that being middle aged had an effect on how we behaved in our new relationships. Many of us felt our age determined to some extent how flexible we were where other people were concerned, and how ready or reluctant to reinvent ourselves.

### **Journal entry**

*In the beginning we had the most terrible rows over arranging the furniture... so much of **the** relationship has been played out in where we put the ornaments. I'd set something down, and she'd come along later and she'd just have to move it slightly to the left... She always insisted there was some kind power thing happening between us that had nothing to do with furniture, and I'd say 'Don't be ridiculous', but in fact she was right.. It was unprecedented for both of us, and I think it was to do with the way we both had defined ourselves before we met each other. Our houses were expressions of ourselves, and we weren't used to having anybody contradict us about those expressions. Then suddenly WHAM! Two fifty-year-old women come together in one house and have to negotiate everything. Everything!... When you're older and have accumulated so much stuff...it's like the museum of your life and **you** want to be the curator. But also, I guess it was about not wanting to disappear into each other.*

Several of us had been surprised to discover that sharing our house with a new female partner at this stage in life could be very difficult:

VIRGINIA: (First relationship at fifty) I think it's at least partly because of our age. I think we've had some blues over how to load the dishwasher or hang the towels up that we wouldn't have had at twenty. It sounds so petty, but obviously it wasn't just about space.

JANE: My first thought is that all humans are territorial. And at fifty, when I moved [interstate] into the territory of another woman who had been used to controlling that territory pretty much as she wished, it was difficult. By fifty I had also been pretty accustomed to controlling my territory, so here we had two queen bees and one hive. The house and garden remained a potential for conflict – petty at times – for a long time. At thirty I had never owned a home, I could move all my possessions in my car, I could have relocated anywhere. It wasn't starting again. It would not have been dismantling anything. I did not have deep roots. I had family and friends that I thought I could keep in close contact with despite geographical separation. I have made many relocations in my life, but I do think relocation becomes more difficult as you get older. You have more to lose by that age, and it's also difficult to develop new networks in a strange place because by then most people have satisfactory and large enough networks to which they are reluctant to add. However, my history of frequent relocations may have given me some skills to cope with such a disjunction at fifty.

Some women felt the issues were about territory and power, and that they would have existed regardless of age.

FLEUR: The thing is, heterosexual women are used to being the homemaker. We are the ones who create the space, and whether we're successful or not is beside the point. The fact of the matter is, it's your creation and it's yours only.

SUSAN: It's about power. You know how in a heterosexual relationship, the domestic sphere gives the woman some sort of feeling of control, and you may not feel like you've got much control in other aspects of your relationship...so that becomes vitally important.

Others attributed territorial difficulties to personality rather than gender or age.

NATALIE: I think maybe we get a little bit too focused on the fact that it's because we're lesbians rather than because we're two people living in the same house. One's untidy and one's a bit pernickity sometimes...I don't think it makes any difference much whether you're in a gay relationship or a het relationship. You'll have those tensions. And maybe you place too much store in them, because in our relationships we're sort of looking for reasons *why*, when maybe there's not any difference really.

And some women, making the most of their acquired adaptability and skills, had no trouble at all in combining forces successfully:

CYNTHIA: We've both been the managers in our [previous married] households. And that worked out very well because we were both very competent in a range of areas, and both of us can do what are normally masculine tasks as well as feminine tasks. So things just went like clockwork. We didn't have to say, 'Can you bring the clothes in while I'm doing the cooking?' There was this beautiful complementarity.

Overall, maturity meant we were able to have unprecedented richness in our relationships with partners. Some of us were certain that being older when we formed our first significant lesbian relationships meant we were all the more grateful for them, and more determined to make them successful.

ELISABETH: I think one becomes more conscious of time... you have to make the most of time. It starts to shift. Not just because you're in a relationship that's precious, though that's a major factor. But the other things that happen with time passing, you know, people growing ill and dying, you just realize that life's too short not to do things. Even though you're frantically busy you just say, well, we'll do it.

CYNTHIA: I think of Carlos Casteneda. 'Death looks over the left shoulder.' So if you know that, you're reminded that each moment is precious. And that, I think, has been a defining factor for us. We have waited so long, we have been so hugely unfulfilled in our other relationships, but we had a very strong idea of what we wanted and it has not in any way been less than our dream. In fact it's been much richer of course, because you couldn't understand the complexity, the tapestry of it. All the facets and threads that come up every time you discover something together.

MEL: I'm not thinking about bed, just companionship. My husband was a lousy companion. And all the people I've knocked around with...nobody did the stuff I wanted to do, but she was a twin soul send down from Heaven for me.

For Rene, who was married for thirty years, advancing age and financial security were also a spur to action:

RENE: All my life I fancied women, and I guess I had fantasies and just stayed put. I don't know, just all of a sudden it all came to a head. A few things happened all at once. I turned fifty-three, and we were supposed to get new contracts at work, and one of my bosses put in the contract that we had to leave work when we were sixty – and I thought goodness, if I've only got seven years I better get on and do something, I have to do it...So I told my husband I wanted to separate.

### *Sexuality in Midlife*

**When we consider the question of sex between ageing spouses we assume that they will do it 'like grown-ups' in Marquez's phrase. At no time in her life is a woman to be permitted to declare the vagina off-limits and take her pleasure by more certain means. If she is one of the many women who have been fucked when**

**they wanted to be cuddled, given sex when what they really wanted was tenderness and affection, the prospect of more of the same until death do her part from it is hardly something to cheer about.**

**Germaine Greer (1991:366)**

In a culture driven by the twin gods of sex and youth, how does a woman approaching fifty feel about embarking on a new physical relationship? On the evidence of this sample, not much differently from the woman of thirty-five. Passion seems to have made the women in the study uniformly unconcerned about not living up to the popular image of a sexual being. And more than one woman commented on how welcome was the opportunity to extend the definition of physical intimacy to include cuddling:

VIRGINIA: I was fifty, I was sixteen years into my second marriage where I expected to stay, I was conscious of how I looked. Physically, I really wasn't date material. But I was so excited I didn't allow it to matter to me much at all. And obviously it couldn't have mattered too much to her or we wouldn't have got together. The fact is, in the early days we were like teenagers. I'd never expected to feel that way again. We'd both sort of put that stuff behind us. We used to laugh about it being a last squirt of the hormones before menopause. But even in the beginning, it was wonderful just to be able to enjoy the sensuality without having to aim for anything else. There was no pressure.

In Chapter 1 we discussed the difficulties of being thrown into the sexual spotlight as a result of having a new sexual partner, or even without a partner, having made our preference public. Karol Jensen points out, 'Despite the lack of scientific evidence to support this, studies surveying opinions have shown that lesbians are believed to be far more sexual than other women' (1999:127). This was particularly difficult for some of the older women, who had come to maturity in less sexually liberated times. For them, the blurring of the public and private spheres was sometimes very uncomfortable. There was a chorus of agreement from the other women when Mel commented, 'Well, you

know what I mean. The sexuality part, to women of a certain generation, is pretty much a taboo subject all the way across the board, hetero or homo or whatever.’

Valerie felt that her age and the era in which she came out isolated her from other lesbians:

VALERIE: I never felt discriminated against because of my past, because of my heterosexual lifestyle or the fact that I had children. But I have experienced ageism. When I was in my forties all my friends were in their twenties, because in the seventies that’s where it all happened, and there weren’t very many forty year olds having their lesbian affairs. It was the only time, when I look back, that they were telling us, ‘You’re too old for this. You should be at home knitting booties or something.’

We discussed similar attitudes, possibly more pronounced in heterosexual society, today. We knew, as far as some people are concerned, any reminder that older women are sexually active at all is a transgression of the bounds of decorum. At the 2003 Melbourne Writers Festival, author Marion Halligan talked about a review she received for her latest novel, *The Fog Garden*. The reviewer had been unable to hide his distaste for the erotic adventures of the heroine, a fifty-plus widow, suggesting Halligan should be more considerate than to give us details of ‘unlovely middle-aged sex’. There is no shortage of people wishing we would stop talking about our lived experience.

### ***Menopause***

Kimmel and Sang (1998:199) cite studies which show that while both heterosexual women and lesbians describe their lives at midlife in positive terms, there are some differences between them. The majority of lesbians said their sex life was as good or better than before menopause. Heterosexual women, on the other hand, expressed a great

deal of worry about their sexuality (Cole and Rothblum 1991, Morokoff 1988 and Sang 1993).

For lesbians ‘the emphasis was on the quality of their *relationships* instead of on their sexual functioning.’ They were less focused on intercourse or penetration than heterosexual women and therefore the physiological changes of menopause might not be so disruptive. ‘Better sex was attributed to being able to be more open and vulnerable, to enhanced communication, and to less pressure about orgasms as well as to the greater importance of touching, loving and sharing’ (Sang, 1993). These are precisely the features that the women in this study mentioned in Chapter 3 as positive differences between sexual relationships with women and those with men.

Because menopause marks the end of child-bearing possibilities it may be emotionally loaded for a woman. Her age is related to her ability to have *more* children if she wants to, or a first child if she’s never had any. No one commented on this directly, but in one of the inter-generational couples, the younger partner was childless, though she had always wanted children, and the older partner had grown children and didn’t want any more. They both understood that commitment to each other would almost certainly end the younger woman’s chances to be a mother herself:

MEL: I originally said yes. I’d already had three, and I said okay, if that’s what you want. And... it was only a matter of months when I started realizing that I really had to ...come out and tell the truth, and the more I thought about this I thought, no, I’m too old. I was fifty. So at some point fairly early in the routine I said, look, I actually don’t want to have children. Sorry, I know I said I would, but I’ve chewed this over and I can’t do this, and we better cool it off now if you want to have kids.

It is worth remembering that twenty years ago there were fewer options for women contemplating motherhood. Technology has made delayed parenthood, and single

parenthood by choice, possibilities, but they came too late for the woman who hit midlife in the 1980s.

JANE: I thought I was already too old at thirty-five to be having a first child. And at forty definitely. I know that people do it today, but most people thought at that time that thirty-five was too old to be having a first child.

### ***Generation Gaps in Relationships***

Another aspect of age which arose as worthy of examination was the age difference between a woman and her partner. As Reid explains, 'It is well recognized that generational differences exist as a result of the historical period in which an individual develops' (1998: 219). There were two couples in this study who had an age difference of more than ten years between the partners. Here the influence of being born into different generations was very evident. Elisabeth came into her first lesbian relationship at the age of fifty, bringing with her from her marriage what she describes as a 'very traditional' way of being. She explains what it was like to have to adjust to new expectations from a younger woman.

ELISABETH: Theoretically I was a feminist. I knew the feminist theories better than she did. But with the person I loved my idea was serving, giving. Well, receiving as well, but it was mainly giving, making her happy. And so driving her absolutely nuts and then having her explain that I was actually disabling her...I was very unaware of that role. I hadn't questioned it really. I'd developed that right through my marriage and it was a survival mechanism in some ways. And so I had to get my head around...rendering someone dysfunctional by taking their independence away. That was like a huge learning curve, and was really very very difficult and distressing at times because I suppose I felt very rejected. I felt that was *me* instead of the socially constructed me, and I kept hanging onto that.

Asked whether this sort of challenge is less the product of same-sex relationships and more to do with the fact that later in life you come with a lot of baggage, her partner answered:

CYNTHIA: I think it is both. I forced her to make changes...[from] all those social mores she'd subscribed to because she came from a slightly different generation, but a very huge generational difference. There's ten years between us, but it's those critical ten years that I went through as part of the social and sexual revolution. That made a huge difference in terms of opening people up. But there's a same sex dimension, because...if she had gone off with a man, especially somebody of her generation, he would have just allowed her to serve him. To some extent, even if she'd married someone ten years younger he'd still have slipped into the same role if *she'd* slipped into that serving role. So she would actually never have had to confront herself, and change the way she has, except if she got together with another woman.

### ***Confidence in Middle Age***

One of the central considerations in reflecting on the impact of this mid-life shift relates to the degree to which a personality acquires resilience over the decades. The Gay and Lesbian Switchboard takes a vast number of calls from young people in crisis over their sexual orientation. The women in this study had already battled all the usual demons by the time we were confronted with this issue. More than one talked in terms of having acquired life skills which made handling crisis easier:

FLEUR: I'm a much more socially skilled person today than I was at when I got married at seventeen. I can hold my own pretty well in any arena. I might not necessarily be 100% comfortable, but I can do it. At seventeen I would have

been scared shitless. I didn't have the confidence that I have now...I didn't have the skills, and I didn't have the guts either, quite frankly.

JANE: I think doing anything at the age of fifty is easier than at the age of twenty... I think if you've kept your wits about you by the time you get to our age you have a full range of strategies to choose from, to cope with any situation, and you're still developing new ones. That's what keeps you young, that you're actually in touch with new things...I'd be sad to be an almost sixty year old in a rut. I've been in ruts...I've been a great big cartwheel stuck in the most ginormous rut and I have no desire to be stuck in a rut ever again. I want to be totally flexible. If I'm a wheel and there's a rut coming up and it makes it better if I change into a flat piece of wood, I'll change. I've developed that philosophy over time, in the school of hard knocks. It's a position that I've fought my way to and have no intention of abandoning it for more orthodox positions.

As well as liking ourselves better, almost all of us admitted that other people's opinions of us mattered much less than they had when we were younger.

FLEUR: One of the most freeing things in my life is getting older and not having to care so much what other people think. I think that's been the biggest blessing as an adult human being. I mean, I really wouldn't have hurt my family that badly [by coming out] at seventeen. By the time I was thirty-four it was a different story. Now that I'm fifty, if what I do hurts them that's actually their problem, not mine.

MARGOT: This point in my life is probably the most comfortable as a lesbian and a feminist that I've ever felt. I think that's about me feeling like I don't have to be approved of by anyone. Particularly the lesbian community.

JANE: When I was younger I think I thought the world was watching me all the time, and I cared what people thought about me ...I'm still a very private person, but I don't give two tupenny damns basically what anyone thinks of me.

Some women felt compassion for those women who had identified early as lesbians. They actually felt their own introduction, and induction, into the lesbian minority was much less difficult.

ANNE: Maybe we had an advantage coming to the whole business after we were a bit more...fully formed...mature? I don't know, I've never actually thought about this myself...I was much more confident at nearly fifty than I was at fifteen. Whatever happened to me I could handle it a lot better...You'd lived through so much by then... you knew it wouldn't kill you. You think the pain will kill you, but it doesn't. You know you'll survive.

JENNIFER: I suppose their histories might have been of...abuse, rejection... Yes, actually until this very minute I don't think I'd thought that through. So I guess that does produce quite a different sort of person. I'm just grateful that wasn't how I became a lesbian.

### *Teasing out the Threads*

At the beginning of this chapter I referred to my initial expectation that middle-aged women were interesting because the older they were the more complex their lives were likely to be. When the women in this study discussed their first impressions of their new lesbian-identified lives, many pointed out that the change had not happened in a social and emotional vacuum. It was also necessary to consider the impact of other big events they had been confronted with at the same time. For instance, any new relationship imposes huge emotional changes, possibly including the loss of another partner, and maybe of a home, and of friends and family and colleagues:

JANE: The household to which I had moved from another state belonged to my partner. At the beginning I didn't know where to put myself, or what role I could

play in the household. This transition was made more difficult by my own mental state, which was probably compounded by dislocation, grief at losing familiarity of surroundings, geography and friends, which manifested as depression. I perceived the strain of my adaptation to strange circumstances. My partner perceived the significant changes to her familiar environment. So we were looking at things from completely different angles, which obviously led to many misunderstandings.

ELISABETH: I was very depressed. I also got pneumonia...just coming out of all the guilt and depression that went on with leaving the marriage.

JENNIFER: It added turbulence into an already emotionally chaotic climate. And I was 48 at the time, with two children who were then very nearly adult.

VIRGINIA: Of course, there was so much else going on for me at that time, it's hard to separate out how much of that chaos was to do with suddenly finding myself at fifty in love with another woman.'

Children were by far the biggest source of complications: the women's children, their partners' children, their partners' lack of children, and the relationship between children and their mother's partner, the children and their fathers. More research could be done on the complex topic of lesbians and motherhood as a normative role. I have only been able to touch on some of the more frequently raised issues.

Of the twenty-three women in this study, twenty had between one and five children. Of the three without children, only one had deliberately chosen not to have them. The other two had found themselves in first lesbian relationships at about the same age (thirty-five and forty years) that they were beginning to accept that they would not have children. Jane had been in a ten year relationship with a man, and had been a stepmother to his children. Halfway through that relationship, at age thirty-five, she had a miscarriage, and five years later the relationship ended.

JANE: By then I was forty and I'd given up on having children, but I hadn't given up on my grief. I think I grieved for ten years after my miscarriage, for the loss of possibilities. I then met the woman with whom I had my first lesbian relationship. She had never wanted children and had a strong philosophy underlying that choice. She didn't think women needed children to be happy. I think I thought I could absorb that philosophy to cure me of any lingering desire to have children. Maybe I did, or maybe time reconciled me to not having children. And other issues became more important. But of course grief is not a comfortable third party to have in a relationship.

The older the woman, or the older her partner, the more likely it is that there will be grandchildren. Several women spoke very positively about becoming grandmothers:

VALERIE: I love grandmotherhood. There aren't too many lesbian grandmothers my age around.

But of particular interest here is the impact on a woman without children of being in a relationship with a woman who has not only children but grandchildren:

ANNE: The daughter is pregnant, so my partner will be a grandmother. So what will that mean? The fact that I didn't have any of my own doesn't mean that I don't like children. I like them very much, but I wonder how we will manage time together. All that is on my mind.

JANE: In my present relationship I am a loved step grandmother. Being absorbed into the family compensates largely for not having blood children as I have the pleasure of interacting with and possibly influencing a new generation.

While relationships with children were discussed in Chapter 4, it is worth looking here at issues arising specifically from the ages of the children, which is closely tied in most cases to the age of the mother.

Kimmel and Sang, referring to the research of Kirkpatrick (1989), Rothschild (1991), and Sang (1992) describe some of the dynamics of midlife lesbian mothers dealing with adolescent children. 'Such relationships can be particularly difficult if the mother is first coming out as a lesbian at midlife' (1998:198). The women in this study tended to largely support this assertion. (See discussion on coming out to children in Chapter 4.) They felt that their younger children had normalized family peculiarities and their adult children, who had usually moved out of home, accepted their mother's decisions about her life. But the adolescent child was old enough to be aware of negative societal attitudes towards lesbians, and likely to be confronting her/his own sexuality at the same time as they were being required to confront their mother's sexuality:

MEL: I've never told my children. I don't think kids want to know about sex full stop. I mean, I don't think they'd consider that I'd still be sexual.

VIRGINIA: Well, there's all this stuff...I think especially sons don't want to know. They can gloss it over with a man, but there's something about their mother taking a lesbian lover...

For Anne, this remained an issue even when her partner's children were grown up:

ANNE: I have found it quite challenging to be with someone who has children in their thirties. They adore their mother. I'm not their mother's first lesbian relationship, so they're perfectly aware of her sexuality...but...I know it's bizarre, but I have yet to stay at her house when her kids are staying, because I just feel so uncomfortable with the idea of making love to her when her kids are next door...the sexual behaviour in front of the children thing is really quite challenging. (laughs) I didn't expect to feel like this. I knew the kids were very

important to her, and I just thought, well, if they like me it will all be alright. But...they do like me, but it's not yet alright for *me*. I haven't yet found my level with them. It's something about ...um, your mother being sexual. (laughter). I can sort of put myself in their shoes, and the thought of my own mother being sexual...is really quite repellant. Too much information.

Fleur recounted a problem involving a partner who behaved inappropriately toward one of her adolescent children:

FLEUR: Yes, it was about not recognising that certain things are just sacrosanct. You don't sexualise the children under any circumstances. So to have a partner who didn't think that way meant that *I* had to think that way, and I guess that in the end that's what I found so offensive. She put my daughter into a sexual role in *my* head. And then for her to take that extra step and offer my daughter a joint in a social setting was, again, so completely outside the role of a parent.

The women were aware of and sympathetic to these sources of conflict, but no one saw herself as a less capable mother because she had become a lesbian. Where feelings of guilt in the mother-child relationship were discussed, they had to do with the introduction of a lesbian partner with whom the children had difficulties, and/or the breakup of the marital family. Jensen cites Coleman's statement that, 'when talking to children of homosexual parents, one quickly realized that the main trauma of growing up with a homosexual parent lies not with the parent's homosexuality but rather with the threat of dissolution of the marital relationship' (1990:126 in Jensen, 1999:174).

Difficulties arising from discord between live-in lovers and younger children were discussed in Chapter 4, but here I want to propose that for some women considerations about young children may have contributed to delaying some life decisions:

FLEUR: I would certainly never have considered buying a house with someone while the kids were living at home, because I needed to know that my house was

my kids' home as well...My loyalty was always with my kids. It meant that I had limitations on who I brought into my life sometimes, because there were certain people who from my perspective as an adult I would have been happy to run around with, but no way known I'd allow them to have contact with my kids. Some of them were a very bad influence frankly. (laughs) Certainly some on the extreme fringes. And I like to play with fire, but that doesn't mean I want my kids exposed to that fire. So some friends were just never invited home.

Some women found that issues arose around step-parenting younger children and combining families when parental authority was still a factor:

FLEUR: I'm very possessive of my kids. They're nobody else's kids. I had never invited anybody to have that kind of [stepmother] role, and I think I made it pretty clear up front. So for someone to try and take on the role behind my back, telling my kids what to do...especially somebody who wasn't used to living with kids.

BECKY: Perhaps in lesbian relationships, other issues create the opportunity for the power imbalance to be played out. It's bound to be there because we're just human beings, and as a parent of young children, in our relationship it was played out via the parenting role.

### *Attitudes to Ageing*

Recent research on an ageing population has challenged ageist myths which represent late life as a period of physical and mental decline (Reid, 1998:216). The women in this study challenged the myths too. As their accounts show, they characterize their older selves by pride and confidence. Still, for some of us ageing remains a phenomenon viewed with ambivalence. The primary fears are basically the same for lesbians as for heterosexual women – loneliness, poverty and poor health with resulting loss of independence.

## **Loneliness**

JENNIFER: This thing about getting older is really central to me... The collapse of the whole set of competencies...this increasing sense of loss of energy, and the aches and pains. And I think, actually, this fear and resentment of this decline has to do with being on my own. Because I think it's one thing getting tired together...you have quiet evenings sitting on the couch watching television...but doing it on your own...and I think I'm spending quite some emotional energy batting this ball away. It's a matter of keeping up my connections, and my exercises...and I think oh, how will I be in ten years time, and I hate ...the thought of not being as well connected to the world, which is important to me. You know, friends and family and all of that.

## **Financial Security**

SANDRA: The other women I know, all they talk about now is this age thing, how they're going to be when they're old, you know, about money. They're frightened they're not going to be able to live the way they're used to, and I think, maybe I should be worrying about that.

DENISE: An issue is the lack of financial safety and security as a single person. As a lesbian without a partner – you know, the old age stuff. And I know...I'm up shit creek compared with how I was. I had all the accoutrements when I was married that went with that lifestyle...I didn't expect to still have a big mortgage at my age, and to be worried every year when my contract is coming up, and not having any savings for the future. And not having any superannuation. Just nothing.

MARNIE: I was better off financially when I was married and I got screwed over in the divorce. I don't even have a house. And I have a son. For a long time it was a huge problem for me, because it created pressure for me and my partner. But one of the biggest shifts is that I no longer feel like I'm prostituting myself.

Poverty's a little more tolerable. But poverty - whether we're lesbians or straight - and loneliness in old age, are horrible things for everyone. And it's not particularly a lesbian thing.

VIRGINIA: You've gone well into your forties thinking you knew what the future held ...you're with your husband and you've worked and you see yourself sitting under the willow tree at seventy-five. Then something cataclysmic happens to your life, and every aspect of it changes, including what security you thought you had, and it's really a bit too late to start thinking about superannuation at that stage. I suppose it's the discrepancy between what your expectations were and where you now find yourself...Sure, by choice. But you know, we choose lots of things that are still painful to execute. (laughter)

### **Aged Care**

The matter of disclosure of sexual orientation under oppressive circumstances is a persistent theme throughout the existing Australian literature (Davis 2001, 1995, 1994 cited by Harrison, 2002) as is the commonly expressed fear of nursing home admission in older age. This fear permeates research and informal discussion around gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/ intersex issues, even where the mainstream literature points out that less than 5% of the Australian aged population ever require nursing home accommodation and this figure is predicted to decline to less than 3% in the future (Harrison, 2002). It also serves to deflect attention from the need to address priorities around advocacy, policy, networking, home support services and legal concerns, which are often lost in the fog of discourse around 'old dykes' homes' as idealistic solutions to perceived threats of persecution.

It was certainly true that in focus groups the idea of lesbian accommodation for the aged was talked about enthusiastically:

JENNIFER: I wish the old dykes' home would get off the ground (laughs) but we've been talking about it for so long, haven't we. There was a meeting about two years ago of a group of lesbians, about eight or ten of us, including a woman who is a financial adviser. And we were saying, can we make some plans, can we keep our eye out for a block of land on which we could build units, or a series of connected units or an old school or something. And she says financially it's not doable... she said unless we all had *lots* of money we couldn't go about setting it up for ourselves from the start.

SANDRA: One of my big wishes is to have lesbians get together and make some kind of provisions for...looking after each other in our old age. Yes. I would hate to think about being stuck in a nursing home with a whole lot of heterosexual women. And that's where we're going. That's the reality. That's why I feel like we should do something with lesbians, because we will be stuck with people having no understanding of who we are, and us not feeling comfortable...unless we make a pact to kill ourselves. (laughter)

There has been very little Australian research into lesbians and the aged care industry, although recently there have been initiatives to change this situation (Horsley, unpublished paper 2002). In the United States, where there are many networks and organizations set up to deal with education, legal issues and general advocacy for aged lesbians, there are still 'very few dedicated glbti residential facilities' (Harrison, unpublished paper 2002) and though there has been considerable investigation into various housing arrangements, 'facilities within a glbti separatist model have to date not proven strongly financially or socially desirable' (ibid: 2002).

Finally, my research reveals that the middle-aged women who participated in this study have coped well with their transition to lesbian life. It certainly accords with previous research on women in mid-life (Sang, 1991) which found that both heterosexual and lesbian women in their early fifties describe their lives in very positive terms. Fertitta found that lesbians experience positive internal changes including 'gaining perspective,

resolution of conflicts, self-acceptance, and wisdom' (quoted in Kimmel and Sang, 1998:194).

My study reveals that maturity had, for the most part, made us more adaptable. We had general concerns about growing older, about being set in our ways, having to let go of old roles, and having to change in relationships with new partners. Some of us worried about the impact of our actions on the lives of our families and friends. But we saw these concerns as inevitable outcomes of any life change at mid-life, rather than specifically attributing them to our becoming a lesbian. In fact, each of us felt that our age at the time of our transition had better equipped us to deal with these issues. Nevertheless, each of us believed that the era in which we grew up, and our age at the time we came out, played a large part in determining our experience of transition.

There is considerable published material on ageing baby-boomers, and also some which focuses on older lesbians. But I am not aware of any current material which specifically examines the cohorts of late coming out, cultural context and impact on identity. I think there is a need for further research into what my participants stressed was a significant factor for them in their coming out process. I would like to see a larger sample than the one I have used that could compare the experiences of middle-aged and older women coming out pre-feminism, in the seventies and eighties, and in what is arguably a post-feminist era.

## ***Conclusion***

This project began because I wanted somebody to talk to about one of the biggest things that had ever happened to me. I had questions to ask, observations to make. At the time, my new partner wasn't very interested in all this raised consciousness and introspection. My old heterosexual friends didn't know any more than I did, and to some extent were busy just coping with their own feelings about my new life. Some lesbians I was meeting for the first time were either past being interested in somebody else's sexual revolution, or were slightly suspicious, even hostile, to my convert's enthusiasm after a lifetime of what they thought of as my 'fence-sitting'. My lesbian friends, those I had known for years, were wonderful to me, and very supportive. But I didn't feel completely free to ask certain questions, or make certain observations, if there was any chance I might unintentionally give offence to them by seeming to be negative in any way. After all, they had decided many years ago that their life was the lesbian life. Basically, I was looking for examples from other women to confirm/affirm me because I often felt so alone with my doubts and questions.

## ***Expectations***

I had expected to find a difference between women who become lesbians in mid-life and women who identify themselves publicly and privately as lesbians when they are young. I expected that more than three decades of participation in the heterosexual world would

result in, at the least, a different sort of lesbian identity. This study supports that expectation.

I had also assumed, given the emphasis our society has traditionally placed on the binary nature of sexuality, that some of us would have seriously reassessed this idea of identity as a result of the shift into lesbian life. But the study suggests something quite different. This journal entry, written when I was two years into the project, shows that what I had sought in the beginning was not what I found:

### **Journal entry, April 2001**

*I wanted quotations, I wanted erudite validations. I wanted books in which women like me talked about the challenges they had faced, not so much in coming out (that had been easy), or even in dealing with approbation (which turned out to be rare), but in the **internal** transition from straight woman to lesbian. I couldn't find them. So then I wanted the women who participated in the research to tell me, 'Yes, it is very difficult sometimes.' That's not exactly what I got. Instead I discovered that lots of women had found the transition so easy, and so rewarding, that they had never looked back.*

*After several focus groups had met I started to think about what I might be doing wrong, by which I meant, in part at least, what was I doing that kept me from getting the answers I wanted. In subsequent groups and interviews I tried to make it clear that I was not looking for negative judgments but for instances of reflection, of surprises, of expectations subverted. I still thought it was highly unlikely that a middle-aged woman could go from living as a heterosexual to being an out lesbian without having to stop and think about a few things.*

But the interviews and focus groups revealed that, while each of the women admitted to profound social, familial and relationship challenges of various kinds, these had not led to them questioning their identity in any fundamental way.

At this point I want to make something clear. While I was recording, and admittedly participating in, focus groups I was also taking a more private journey. In the early days my knowledge about heterosexual women who become lesbians later in life was *not* theoretical, nor was it extensive, but came from my own unfolding experience. This was both my strength and my weakness. It meant that I had entrée to, and passionate curiosity about, the world I was investigating. But it was limiting for several reasons. First, I had yet to learn to differentiate between my particular experience and a more general one. Because I had some milestones in common with my participants, I suppose I had expected *my* story would just be retold by them in *their* words. I didn't yet realize how varied and sometimes diametrically opposite to my own their stories would be, and how much I was going to have to relinquish my initial expectations of sameness.

Second, the 'unfolding' nature of my experience meant that in the early days I didn't have the distance I needed to really understand it. I couldn't assess the impact of my transition, because I was still *in transition*. Some of the fallout hadn't started yet, and some of it had already appeared but would disappear so quickly that it would cease to be an issue in the future. I couldn't know all that at the time. It took that first couple of years for me to begin to understand that I was investigating an ongoing process, not a sudden, significantly altered, fully and finally-formed identity. And it took a couple more years for me to fully appreciate the extent to which this was probably the case for the other women. I feel certain that what they shared with me and with each other in the focus groups was what was true and important for them at that time. But a month earlier, a fortnight later, the emphasis might have been quite different.

That is how it was for me. I kept clarifying, uncovering, reconsidering and repositioning myself on my personal journey, not only as a researcher but as a border-dancing woman like my participants. In the final stages of writing up this exegesis I had many occasions to wish I'd asked those women different questions, or asked them differently, or maybe pushed a little harder or dug a little deeper for some answers, or perhaps listened more

carefully and recognized when an answer was begging for another question. But this kind of thinking ignores the reality. I couldn't ask about what I had not yet discovered.

As well as starting the project with limited personal insight, I had a lot of scholarly catching up to do. Though I had considered myself a feminist for nearly thirty years, I was certainly not up to date on feminist theory, much less on contemporary theories of sexual orientation or post-modern discourse on identity. I now feel I have a theoretical context in which to place both my personal experience and data derived from my fieldwork.

But I confess to some dark days of doubt when I realized that I wasn't going to get the results I'd predicted. If nobody's identity had been challenged by the shift from heterosexuality to lesbianism, had I been wasting everyone's time? My supervisor was quick to remind me, the goal of this kind of research is not to have your suspicions confirmed, but to see where the enquiry leads you.

The following journal entry details a red letter incident with one of my mentors, an early-identified lesbian without whom I could never have produced the finished work:

**Journal entry, March, 2003**

*Today on the phone with R. we both had a revelation. We were talking about my thesis, and I said something about relationships with men that she disagreed with. (She is, not surprisingly, pretty uninterested in relationships with men.) So I explained that I particularly wanted to understand the nature of the attraction of opposites, and the creation of a self-image based to some extent on how it was reflected and who it excluded. I wanted to explore definitions of feminine and how those were affected by the presence or absence of the masculine. (I guess that's teetering on the edge of political incorrectness.) AND (this was very important) I said I was not actually writing a thesis about lesbians per se. That was the first time I'd ever articulated this critical point, and I*

*will be eternally grateful to M. for letting me use her as a sounding board or else I might never have figured it out.*

*Anyway, we hung up with a bit of tension hovering in the air. But within minutes she rang me back and said she realized I'd become the 'expert'. For years I'd taken my questions to her; in my mind she was the 'real lesbian'. Now, she said, I'd finally reached a point through my research where I was able to have an opinion of my own instead of just settling for her version of reality. What's more, I could now back it up with a well-considered argument. This was a huge and generous compliment coming from her. And the thing is, she was right! I've been basking in the knowledge all day.*

### **Other Outcomes**

Esther Madriz, in *Focus Groups in Feminist Research*, remarks that focus groups 'may even act as agents for social change where participants use their own words and their own framework' (2003:848). She is particularly concerned with women traditionally at risk of being misrepresented in research data, that is women of colour, non-English speaking women, and women with limited educations. While the women in my focus groups were well-educated and articulate, they nevertheless benefited from the interaction among themselves which the focus group provided. I received many phone calls from participants following our meetings, in which they said how much value there had been for them in having to think and talk about the issues we raised.

One group in particular was composed of women who had been active in the women's liberation movement in the 1970s and who had been members of feminist consciousness-raising groups. The focus group for this project had the effect of reminding them how much they had enjoyed meeting with other women to discuss personal and political matters, and of how these meetings had provided them with an important sense of being part of a community. In the act of discussing and lamenting the absence of [lesbian] community in their present lives, they realized they could do something about it. The

result was the formation of a lesbian book group which continues to meet monthly four years after that focus group.

### ***Further Research***

As far as I can tell, there is a gap in the research on the interconnections of age at the time of coming out and the social milieu in which the coming out occurs. While I have touched on it in this study, and believe it to be a crucial factor in a woman's experience, I was unable to find as much relevant information as I would have liked. Motherhood was seen by many of the women in this study as one of their most important identifiers. It was also discussed as the issue most likely to signify a heterosexual history, and to cause friction in relationships with early-identified lesbians. It would be interesting therefore to investigate the impact on lesbian communities of new life choices for women as a result of reproductive technologies and changing attitudes to same-sex couples adopting children. I think there is enough scope here for another detailed study which assesses and correlates the numerous factors related to age, historical stage, and coming out.

### ***Summary of Findings***

Most of the twenty-three women who participated had felt affection, of some sort and to varying degrees, for previous male partners. Many of us had enjoyed heterosexual sex and some of us believed we still could under the right circumstances. Some of us had been relatively happy wives. Most of us were mothers, and those who were tended to feel their motherhood was at least as much, if not more, of a defining factor in our sense of who we were than our sexuality was.

Some of us had made deliberate emotional and/or political choices to become lesbians. Others had been propelled into lesbian life by a relationship, often for the first time, with another woman. Of those, several felt they had not made a conscious choice to become a

lesbian, at least not forever, but that by presenting as a lesbian they had, over time, to some extent cut off the option of a heterosexual relationship. This study argues that identity is not fixed, and that its expression is not linear, that is, not proceeding in one direction only, from heterosexual to homosexual. But this argument may become purely theoretical for an individual woman with the passage of time. For many of us in significant/long term relationship/s with other women, men had gradually stopped figuring as potential partners. One choice had led to another and we discovered we'd gone down an alternate pathway rather than danced over a border with the possibility of return. Having made that clear, I must also stress that no one for whom this was true expressed any regret about it.

Some of us had never found much in stereotypical lesbian images to either identify with or be attracted by. But all of us were drawn to other women. So what did that make us? In the end, the question turned out to be largely irrelevant. It seemed we were what, and who, we had always been, and that we had merely expanded our repertoire of expressions of ourselves.

The fact that we had long-established public markers for a heterosexual identity, such as marriage, children, and social networks, *had* added complicated steps to our dance. But each of the women who contributed to this project had managed to negotiate the internal shift from heterosexuality to lesbianism with her core identity, if there is such a thing (and this study questions that assumption), intact.

What this study *does* propose is that age and maturity, far from making the transition more difficult, had actually been responsible for giving the women an increased self-acceptance. Based on years of being confronted, simply by life, with unpredictability and paradox, the women had developed the ability to accommodate change and ambiguity. It is also true that the women believe, in most cases, that their transition was made easier by coming out at an age which coincided with the liberalization of society, not simply in terms of sexual expression, but more generally in its recognition of, and increased regard for, difference.

These are two of the few generalizations I can make after transcribing all those hours of focus group and interview tape. For the most part, what I am left with at the end of the research is twenty-three disparate stories. As many, in fact, as I might have got from twenty-three middle-aged heterosexual women. The complex interplay of countless factors in these women's lives means it's impossible to finish this thesis off neatly. In a sense it will never be finished. Like any really good story it keeps going, suggesting other stories, long after the last word has been read.

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<i>Appendix I</i>	<b>Statistics on Participants</b>
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	Age in 2000	Age at coming out	Year of coming out	Years of Marriage/ Relationship	Children
1.	46	35	1988	10	1
2.	46	35	1988	10	4
3.	54	45	1991	25	2
4.	57	35	1977	15	3
5.	49	40	1991	17	3
6.	50	43	1993	20+	2
7.	49	39	1990	20+	3
8.	50	44	1994	20	2
9.	43	35	1992	12	3
10.	50	40	1990	6	2
11.	60	54	1994	25	3
12.	57	48	1991	2+	2
13.	56	35	1979	various	1
14.	58	48	1990	20+	3
15.	67	35	1968	22	2?
16.	65	35	1970	20+	2?
17.	65	55	1990	30	4
18.	45	35	1990	briefly	0
19.	56	54	1998	25+	2
20.	55	40	1985	various	0
21.	50	40	1990	10	0
22.	54	48	1996	12 and 16	2

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