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**Policing the Boundaries:  
Issues of Identity and Community in  
New Zealand Lesbian Newsletters  
1973-1992**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements  
for the degree of Master of Philosophy  
in Women's Studies at  
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## **Abstract**

The concept of identity was taken for granted as a basis for political activity by lesbian feminist communities worldwide in the 1970s and 1980s. An examination of the history and implications of this concept, using the writings of Fuss, Cohen, Stein, Phelan and Alice, reveals that it has sometimes been deeply implicated in narrow, rigid, essentialist thinking. There is little evidence of attempts during those decades to deconstruct the notions of identity on which were based key theories such as the political implications of the personal, political correctness, and a notion of lesbian 'purity'.

In New Zealand, some of the implications of understanding 'lesbian identity' as universal can be examined through the lesbian newsletters. The collectives which put together these newsletters from 1973 to 1992 wrote with an implicit faith in the notion of 'lesbian identity politics' and in the dictum 'the personal is the political'. This belief limited what they could see as in possibilities of relationships with other lesbians, with other feminists, with gay men, and with the wider community of New Zealand society at the time.

A careful, detailed reading of the nationally available newsletters gives a picture of the emergence of 'political correctness', although there are also traces of evidence of other lesbians for whom the idea of political correctness is unacceptable. The presentation of the issues of the place of separatism, expressions of sexual desire, relationships with heterosexual feminists and with other 'queer' groups, reveals how the 'personal' was politicised in terms of narrow notions of identity. Political issues which the newsletters represented as especially affecting lesbians include Homosexual Law Reform and widening amendments to the Human Rights Legislation, some of the policies of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and issues around race and racism. Examination of how these issues were dealt with in the newsletters shows how the framework of lesbian identity politics limited how these 'political' issues were made personal for readers.

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis has been produced in the face of difficulties that I sometimes felt would be impossible to overcome. However, the continuing support and encouragement of Dr Lynne Alice has made the transition from one academic discipline to another possible and even successful. The support and friendship of Dr Pauline Simonsen and Grant Harris, and their listening ears, have been invaluable, as has the interest and informative presence of Dr Lynne Star. As always, the continuing presence of Jane in my life has nourished and cherished me, and allowed me to see what is possible.

## **Prefatory Remarks**

I have not been able to interview the lesbians who were involved with producing these newsletters, and have had limited time to discuss the history of lesbian feminism in New Zealand with lesbians who have been involved with lesbian feminist communities. I have been constantly aware, especially as I have edited and revised this work, that I have only the limited window of the texts before me, and a few other resources, to peer into the development of lesbian feminist theory in this country. I hope that in the future this work will be supplemented and improved by oral histories and memoirs and other autobiographical and biographical writing. I have tried continually to emphasise the partial nature of this study, which is entirely textual and may represent the viewpoints of only a tiny minority of lesbians. It is important to me, but more especially to all New Zealand women who identify as lesbians, that this work is not taken as definitive.

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## Chapter One:

### Introduction to myself the project and the newsletters

#### Introduction

When I first realised why I was so unhappy, back in the first months of 1987, I left my husband and children in suburbia and tried to make some sense of what was happening to me. I made some tentative forays into what appeared to be the lesbian community in the large city where I was living. In trying to establish contact with other lesbians who had children I met a brick wall of indifference from the women on Lesbianline.<sup>1</sup> It was at this time that the influence of the phrase 'the personal is the political' was at its greatest in New Zealand lesbian communities. Although I have never met any of the women I spoke to on the helpline personally, I can only assume they were responding to the strictures that were widely accepted, and which regulated what personal behaviour and beliefs were politically correct. I had never heard of 'political correctness', and it was inconceivable to me, as a feminist, that women could turn away from another woman because she had children. It was through the local Lesbian Newsletter, when I finally discovered it, that I began to feel a part of a

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<sup>1</sup> A local phone-in information service advertised in the personal columns of the daily papers. It is often the first point of contact for lesbians with other lesbians.



larger community and realise that I was not the only lesbian mother in the universe.

Having now become a part of the University culture, I feel fortunate in that so far I have never felt compromised, restricted, or disadvantaged by being an 'out' lesbian.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it has brought me a few advantages; my street-cred as a feminist is, to the non-gay world, impeccable – I am always asked to give the introductory lecture on Feminist Literary Criticism to the first year English students, and I make sure that the trial of *The Well of Loneliness* gets a mention.<sup>3</sup> As both a lesbian and an older woman who had experience of heterosexual feminism and motherhood, I was well situated among a group of post-graduate students at a point when a research assistant with an interest in women and sexuality in New Zealand was required.<sup>4</sup>

It was this research that led me to the Lesbian and Gay Archives of the National Library, and to some broken sets of lesbian newsletters, which intrigued me. In them I read evidence of debates, local, national and global, alongside notices for picnics, parties and dinners. There were both national

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of "coming out" is discussed in depth in Chapter Two. Briefly here I mean that I am known to be a lesbian by colleagues and friends.

<sup>3</sup> *The Well of Loneliness* is a novel about the lives of lesbian women by Radclyffe Hall. It was first published in Britain in 1928, and was banned after an obscenity trial which made legal history. The book itself, not the author, was on trial, and the judge refused to hear the expert witnesses, who included Virginia Woolf, on the book's literary merits. Clearly, it was the subject of the novel, not the way it was expressed, that was considered obscene – the most explicit line in it is "and that night they were not divided".

<sup>4</sup> This project was preliminary research for a book by Dr Lynne Alice of Massey University, on Women and Sexuality in New Zealand since World War II.

and local series, some of which seem to have run for a few issues and some of which ran for years. Some were hand-written and badly photocopied, some professionally typeset on newsprint with shiny covers. As I skimmed the pages for information about lesbian community debates, I often became sidetracked, and realised I was on the verge of a much bigger project. This thesis is that project.

The number of women who consider themselves part of 'the lesbian community' in most towns and cities is relatively small; in Palmerston North, a city of around 100,000 people, the lesbian phone list presently has around 100 names on it and the local Newsletter a circulation of less than 200. The politics of small communities are necessarily different from those of lesbians who live more anonymous lives in larger cities, but the New Zealand newsletters, even those from Auckland, have what I think is a relentlessly parochial feel.

What I mean by parochial is probably best demonstrated by three attributes common to the newsletters. Firstly, the collectives, almost without exception, agreed not to alter any contributions, and to print everything they received. The standard of contributions varies, and these variations in style and expression sometimes seem odd and clumsy to those used to reading professionally edited material. Secondly, the collective mode of editing, which really amounts more to laying out, causes a lack of continuity between and within issues. This means that articles in direct opposition to each other appear, with no background to the discussion, and no information to help the reader focus on what is behind the discussion. Thirdly, most of the news is local to the town where the newsletter is produced, even in the two nationally distributed newsletters that form the

basis of this study. Contributions from overseas are usually presented as straightforward and not needing any background. Thus a dyke writing from India, for example, will reflect the issues as she sees them, and her view will go unchallenged, or will be challenged in the next issue with no indication of the history of the debate.<sup>5</sup> These practices, although adopted for good reasons, sometimes cause issues to appear more personal than theoretical, and can be frustrating for the reader.

The amount of energy invested in the production of these parochial-feeling newsletters may be due partly to the lack of overt gay culture in most towns and cities. There are still no widely-used gay bars, and certainly no established women's bars, in most towns, suburbs or cities. As most gay meeting-places have been, and probably still are, private homes or privately-advertised venues, newsletters have been the most convenient way to keep lesbians who wished to identify as part of a community informed. Lacking a gay press, and being almost invisible in the mainstream press, lesbians have used newsletters both to inform themselves and, to a limited extent, to provide a forum for debate on the local ramifications of wider issues.<sup>6</sup> These include separatism, working with other women's groups, racism, and other problems within communities. National gay issues, such as Homosexual Law Reform and Human Rights legislation, have also been widely debated, although other national issues, such as support for Maori sovereignty and peace camps, and most international issues, have

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<sup>5</sup> The use of the word dyke, until the late 1960s, was a term of abuse for a "mannish" lesbian, especially in the United States. It was reclaimed for use with pride by lesbian feminists. See, for example, the 1971 first edition of *Our Bodies Ourselves*, in which the chapter written by a gay collective is entitled "In Amerika they call us Dykes".

<sup>6</sup> Although there has been a gay press since the early 1980s, which produced *Pink Triangle* and *Man to Man* (now *ExPress*), it has been, until recently, almost completely male oriented.

tended to be reported rather than debated.

### The Project

This project has a very specific framework. It looks only at some newsletters published in New Zealand from 1973, when Ngahua Te Awekotuku founded Gay Liberation in New Zealand, to 1993, the year that Human Rights Legislation at last made discrimination against lesbians, gay men, and people living with HIV/AIDS illegal over a wide range of areas.<sup>1</sup> The research is based on a reading of most of the issues of the long-standing national newsletters *Circle* and *LIP*, and a few of the local newsletters. South Island newsletters were difficult to find – there does not seem to have been the same energy put into written community-building in Christchurch, Dunedin, Nelson, Timaru or Invercargill. There were fewer of them, and they acted more as social event reminders and local news updaters than as forums for discussions and debates on theoretical issues. Perhaps because of this, most of my contacts had not kept back issues, but I have been able to read a few issues of *Against All Odds* (Dunedin) and *Outautahi Lesbian Newsletter* (Christchurch). I have not been concerned with fiction or poetry, nor with most of the advertising, other than to categorise it generally in relation to the more theoretical articles, and how or if it was used as a source of income for the collectives who wrote, published and distributed the newsletters.

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<sup>1</sup> Details of the history of Human Rights Legislation in New Zealand are in Chapter Six.

### The format of the newsletters

What did these newsletters look like?<sup>8</sup> The amount of time and energy put into reproducing a professional-looking paper, with few spelling mistakes and an interesting layout, varies from one letter to another, and even from one edition of the same newsletter to another. As all the work done over the years to produce the kilograms of newsletters has been voluntary, and usually done collectively by non-professional writers, editors, publishers and typesetters, standards are, generally, high.<sup>9</sup> This is especially true of *Circle*, produced before desk-top publishing became available. There were two papers in the period surveyed that could claim to be nationally distributed for any length of time: *Lesbian Feminist Circle* (mainly from Wellington) and *Lesbians In Print* (mainly from Auckland).

*Circle* put out its first issue in 1973. It began monthly, and had high production values right from the start, with coloured covers and neatly laid-out pages of graphics and text. Every issue is clearly labelled 'For Women Only' (latterly For Womyn Only).<sup>10</sup> Later it became a quarterly, often running at around seventy back-stapled A5 pages. In *Circle 30* (1978) there is a herstory of *Circle*, including the information that the original collective produced 600 copies, but the number has settled at 475. The last

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<sup>8</sup> Regional newsletters are still (1995) circulating, among them *Wellington Lesbians Newsletter* and *Tamaki Makaurau Lesbian News*, but there is presently no national newsletter in circulation.

<sup>9</sup> This is not meant to imply criticism of the newsletters as not measuring up to a professional standard; quite the opposite. Considering the size of issues, and the deadlines that would have been necessary for their production, they are generally clearly laid out and readable.

<sup>10</sup> Although I use the spelling "women" and "woman", I have reproduced variant spellings ("wimmin", "womin", "womyn", "wombyn") as they occur. An interesting variant spelling is "femele" for female in *LIP 26* (1992). The writer claims "Femele comes from the French Femelle and this apparently has nothing to do with male. Femele is returning to the original" (p14, my emphasis).

issue was produced in 1985. As most copies would have been read by more than one lesbian, it is possible that, at that time, Circle had over 1,000 readers.

*Lesbians In Print* (usually referred to as *LIP*) began as *Circle* was running down - the first issue was produced in April 1985 and it continued as a bi-monthly until July 1992. After two years the glossy cover, overprinted in one colour, became a feature, and it usually ran to around forty A4 back-stapled pages (although one issue contained sixty). From *LIP 6* onward, each issue is marked "For Lesbians Only", in response to a request from a reader. I was not able to get information about how many copies were distributed.

*Lesbians Newsletter (WLN)*, produced in Wellington, began in 1988 as a bi-monthly, photocopied, typed A4 publication with a coloured cover. Professional typesetting gradually became a feature for some of the pages, and, by the end of 1990, it was almost completely professionally typeset. It retains a coloured cover and corner-stapled A4 appearance, usually runs from twenty to thirty pages, and is marked "Lesbians Only".

Tamaki Makaurau Lesbian Newsletter (*TMLN*), begun in 1990, is the most professional-looking of the later group of regional newsletters. It is prepared on desk-top publishing, produced by a laser printer and reproduced on "fully recycled" paper. Without a cover, but a front page like a newspaper's and a back page of classifieds, it is the most professional-looking of any of the newsletters surveyed. It is a back-stapled A4 8-page monthly tabloid publication which concentrates on news and short features, and, as its appearance suggests, is probably the

nearest New Zealand has produced to a lesbian newspaper.

Distribution of newsletters was always a problem. *LIP 15* (1988) reports that the collective was constantly receiving letters from women asking how to get hold of copies, and yet always had unsold copies. They pleaded with readers, especially rural readers, to become involved with distribution, as a good way of controlling supply and ensuring that copies did not end up in the hands of non-lesbians. There is constant tension between the need to let lesbians know about the newsletters, and to avoid their falling into heterosexual hands. While some of this paranoia now seems ludicrous, a concrete example might serve to show why the producers of newsletters felt control over distribution was needed. In *Circle 33* (1980), a woman from the small rural town of Carterton wrote about a small support group (5 women) operating in her area as a result of running a newspaper advertisement:

I would like our group to enlarge so much we could take over this small town and call it Lesbianville. But for now I'll settle for sharing some evenings and days with local lesbians and building a support group up in our area (p62).

This might seem an innocent enough pipedream. But two years later, the national tabloid weekly *Truth* ran this billboard:

#### RADICAL LESBIANS PLAN SMALL TOWN TAKEOVER

over a scare story about the Radical Lesbian Separatists who were trying to take over Carterton. The story was based on the letter to *Circle*, although no context was given.<sup>11</sup> Incidents such as these made the newsletter collectives even more careful about their distribution methods.

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<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Sue Walker for details of this incident. It may be of interest that the neighbouring small town of Carterton now has the first male to female transsexual Mayor in New Zealand, possibly in the world: Georgina Beyer.

The Women's Bookshops in Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington and Christchurch always sold *LIP* and *Circle*, and their local newsletters as well. Most of them also ran mail-order lists that rural women may not have been aware of. Despite the uncertain distribution systems that the collectives found it necessary to use, the nationally-distributed newsletters were widely read and discussed in the lesbian communities of New Zealand.

The 'underground' and secret atmosphere surrounding these publications still lingers. A colleague writing a dissertation about lesbian fiction in New Zealand, who was reading the fiction contributions in *LIPs* and *Circles*, was warned that it was inappropriate for her to be using that material, as it is clearly marked "For Women Only" or "For Lesbians Only". I have not felt constrained by that stricture, which seems to me to be about more about a desire to keep lesbians apart from the wider society than about the slight paranoia that has reigned. My example above gives at least a partial explanation of this paranoia, but it has spilled into a notion of purity and separateness, and an exaggerated need to ensure safety for lesbian creativity. However, I have not used the names of any of the writers or collective members, even where they are identified in the text and are well-known as lesbians in New Zealand. I have reported the debates as accurately as I could, although, of course, in such a way as to support my main theoretical contentions. The collectives that published the newsletters are not responsible for the constructions I have put on their works.

I believe that published material, apart from copyright restrictions, should be available for readership and debate. I do not believe I am responsible for the construction that others may place on my work. I argue that I have the right to defend that work, however, and that no debate about lesbian



life should be considered closed. For me this would be a denial of our ability to grow in, learn from and assimilate the world in which we live, and which we work in constantly to change for the better.

#### My reading of the newsletters

Much of the writing I have read and commented on is intensely personal. I have tried to respect the emotional content of writers' opinions, although some of the ideas are difficult to treat as serious.<sup>12</sup> The contemporary American novelist and critic Joyce Carol Oates has said she dislikes the distancing inherent in the use of the word "texts" to refer to work originally written as "urgent human documents".<sup>13</sup> Although her comments were made in the context of writing by nineteenth-century women, the sentiments behind them were very close to mine as I read the newsletters that make up this study. The women involved in these debates did not see them as academic questions. They saw them as ways of defining themselves and defending their right to live in a world that seemed hostile to them. I have been very aware of that as I have read and responded to their writing.

It is a continuing source of amazement to me that my own identity has undergone, and is always undergoing, so many changes, and yet I still claim it as mine without hesitation. Part of this development was in my

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<sup>12</sup> For example, a writer to *LIP 23* (1991) makes a case for vegetarianism on the grounds that eating female animals means eating our sisters, and eating male animals involves taking male essence into our bodies, which, as lesbians, we should not do. She refers to "unborn male chicks" (p20) – it took me a minute to realise she means eggs.

<sup>13</sup> Oates, in her 1987 essay "Pleasure, Duty, Redemption Then and Now: Susan Warner's *Diana*" refers to the use of the word "text" in literary circles as "that most sinister of terms".

'coming out' and living as a lesbian, but part was also in allowing myself to 'come out' and engage in academic work, to give in to the desire to read and learn formally that I had suppressed for years.<sup>14</sup> This study is part of an attempt to bring these two 'becomings' together: to integrate the political implications of living as a lesbian in the late twentieth century – which, as Fuss (1990) points out, "has certain political effects (whether I wish my sexuality to be so politically invested or not)" (p101) – with the personal skills I have gained from academia. Little research has been done on the last twenty-five years of lesbian activism and lesbian lives in New Zealand.<sup>15</sup> This present work is only part of a beginning.

I have organised this study into two main parts: the next two chapters discuss the concept of lesbian identity and the following chapter investigates how lesbians in New Zealand have defined themselves. The rest of the thesis will then discuss the application of the phrase "the personal is the political", as it occurred in the pages of the newsletters.

There would be many ways to read these newsletters; my reading is within a framework of post-structuralist theorising of identity as a basis for community.<sup>16</sup> It is my contention that the newsletters were the product of

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<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Terry Webster, whose presentation at the Feminism/Post-feminism/Postmodernism Conference, Palmerston North, Nov 17–19 1995, provided me with the phrase "closet epistemophiliac" to describe this 'becoming'.

<sup>15</sup> Julie Glamuzina's book *Out Front* is a partial history of lesbian activism in New Zealand, which could be a useful background to anyone interested in some of the issues raised in this work.

<sup>16</sup> By this I mean that I am interested in how essential binaries that have been set as the basis of epistemology can be shown to be inherently unstable and contextual. I consider investigation into the production of meaning and resistance to any fixing or universalising of meaning or experience to be crucial to poststructuralist thinking.

a lesbian feminist community that envisioned itself in opposition to mainstream feminism, to the gay movement, and to the dominant culture. Much of their theorising was based on rigid, essentialised ideas about gender and identity, and they helped to define the boundaries of their culture to itself. Chapters Two and Three will set up this framework, by considering the development of theorising about identity, especially sexual identity, definitions of 'lesbian', and the influential notion of identity politics. I am very interested in what Alice has called "essentialising moves" within lesbian theory, and will be highlighting the way that essentialist ideas frequently underpin the articles printed in the newsletters.<sup>17</sup>

I have found the views of the lesbians who contributed to the newsletters about the place of bisexuals in the community, and how you can tell who is a real lesbian, to be revealing of an attitude that would limit and confine lesbians to a small, clearly identified grouping, if lesbians all conformed to it. Ideas about what it means to be a lesbian are often confused and prescriptive, almost Calvinist in their judgemental norms, and deeply rooted in structuralist notions of social interaction and essentialist views of personal development. There is also a strong strand of identification with matriarchal myths and legends, as pointing to an ideal past society that could be, or will be, recaptured.<sup>18</sup> All this adds up to a narrow notion of lesbian identity, which has sometimes led to a political naivety,

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<sup>17</sup> Alice actually says "The reductive logic of the 'essentialising move' involves a slippage from a constructionist privileging of cultural discourses to biologicistic explanations. What is significant in the 'essentialising move' is not the displacement between one category and another – but why and how and under what social circumstances, the slippage occurs and seems inevitable" (forthcoming, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> My use of the words "myth" and "legend" is not intended to imply that these theories are harmful or wrong because untrue. All societies and communities apparently need creation myths, and lesbians are no exception.

The phrase "the personal is the political", which once served the useful purpose of not allowing political activists to ignore the power imbalances created in real interactions between real people, has sometimes become not only not useful, but positively harmful to some lesbian communities. What was once a necessary point to make, "The personal is [the] political", developed the potential to become restrictive and energy sapping: "[All of] the personal is [the whole of the] political". It has brought a 'big sister is watching you' aspect to some women's lives. Among those few who take the notion of 'political correctness' seriously, this phrase justified a puritanism that has only recently been questioned, and a notion of perfectibility and purity that is dangerously close to fanaticism in some of the writings I have read. In my readings of the newsletters, it has also, in the areas where lesbian lives are affected by the wider community, caused "the reduction of the political to the personal" (Fuss 1990, p102). Some took it to mean that little mattered except the personal, and so encouraged separatism, isolationism and its consequence, political impotence. To show how this has happened I will look at the construction of "personal" and of "political" in Chapter Two, and at how at how connections were made between them in Chapter Three, along with some of the anomalies and ironies that these connections invoked.

In the second part of the study, chapters Four to Six, I have written about the newsletter debates on theory and practice, local, national and international, especially what they reveal about the issues of 'community', 'identity' and 'difference' among New Zealand lesbians. In Chapter Four I compare the theoretical ideas that have been developed about the nature of 'identity' and the place of 'difference' in communities with what I read in the newsletters. Generally, I found the ideas about identity which form the

basis of thinking by the lesbians who wrote to the newsletters to be deeply enmeshed in essentialist notions about gender, from which they produce didactic articles and discussions. This provides a marked contrast with the writings which I examine in Chapter Two, which question the basis of both essentialism and constructionism and binaries, and investigate the binaries of gender.

I have called Chapter Five "Politicising the Personal". It includes some of the material about local issues and events which directly affected individual lesbians, such as debates over issues of eroticism and relationships, interaction with heterosexual feminists, and issues around domestic violence. Again, the presence of the 'political' was always prescriptive and limiting, with the emphasis in the writing on the maintenance of a lesbian community at least partly separated from mainstream society.

Chapter Six, called "Personalising the Political", looks at how issues that are seen in the wider community as political were personalised within the pages of these newsletters. There were many national political issues affecting women in this period. Lesbians were active in mainstream feminism, and the difficulties they encountered in this role in the late 1970s were crucial to New Zealand feminism. While lesbians may not have seen issues of abortion and contraception as affecting them directly, feminist activism which originally mobilised over those issues lead to the establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1984. Lesbians were active in the early years of the Ministry and in its consultative processes, and in the fight for (male) Homosexual Law Reform, as well as in the lengthy battle for lesbians and gay men to be included in Human Rights Legislation. All of these issues were debated in the pages of the

newsletters. Also reported were the activism of a small number of lesbians in peace issues, demonstrations against the 1981 Springbok Rugby Tour and the 1990 Sesquicentennial celebrations, and environmental issues. All of these issues involved lesbians being involved in coalitions with other political groupings, and it is possible to detect a process of learning how to become successful coalition partners, as the older 'certainties' about identity begin to loosen in the 1990s.

The lives of the women who make up lesbian communities have many facets. The concept of 'lesbian identity' is more than the idea that lesbians can claim they have an identity as a group within the wider society. It has the potential to cause one facet, the fact that they prefer to be erotically involved with women, to become applicable to much more than just sexual activity. It can even be taken, at its extreme, to mean that lesbians are apart from, and directly opposed to, the wider society. In *LIP 21* (1989), an article about the Gaia philosophy contains the following sentence: "I am a dyke, and consider myself a separate species [of human]". Citing a matriarchal society, the 'truths' of which are now largely 'forgotten', she goes on to blame the missing arm of the X chromosome for men's inability "to be in touch, know the ways we did" (p33-4). This point of view sees men as dangerous mutants, and women who relate to them as traitors. It would never have been the view of more than a tiny minority of lesbians, but the essentialist notions about gender that underlie it have been widely accepted, and expanded into the concept of cultural feminism. This was one of the main building blocks of lesbian feminist theory, although of course not all lesbians who are feminists would support the viewpoints of cultural feminism.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Alice (forthcoming 1996) discusses this in more detail. See Chapter Two.

On a less radical scale, but still intent on defining what it is to be lesbian, a contributor to *LIP 15* (1988), announcing that she is planning a Lesbian festival, states "...for me lesbian culture is my primary cultural identification" (p18). She has already stated what that means: "attitudes to world peace [unspecified], our concern at the rape and abuse of the earth and therefore our care for nature and the environment; awareness of, and support for indigenous people's reclaiming their cultures and exposing injustices." She sees "the patriarchy is crumbling", as "more and more of us" get into "significant positions of power." The evidence from the newsletters, however, is that issues of peace, environment and indigenous struggles are actually quite minimal, and tend to be reported rather than debated. What is foregrounded, in most issues, is how day-to-day personal issues make up the fabric of a 'politically correct' lifestyle.

For many lesbians, these newsletters were the only contact they had with theorising about issues that affected their lives. The quality of writing and the often poor logic behind contributions was not always conducive to clear communication, but the writers were at least honest, even if sometimes naive. Reading the newsletters at least gave lesbians a sense of some kind of community; it invested their personal lives with something more collective, and gave them the feeling they could be part of a movement.

## Chapter Two:

### Issues of identity in lesbian communities

#### Introduction

The lesbian newsletters that form a basis for this study codify certain sets of assumptions about lesbians, identity, and how communities work. These assumptions are centred on, and reflect the growth and hegemony of, some lesbian-feminist theories from the United States, the Britain, and New Zealand.<sup>20</sup> The production of these assumptions over time and the results of their adoption by lesbians will be traced through close readings of the newsletters in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. In this chapter and the next I discuss the concept of lesbian identity and the debates around its development since the early 1970s. Beginning with a short overview of the history of theorising about identity, I look at early lesbian-feminist ideas about identity, which have been influential in forming the basis of what is called identity politics. I then discuss in more detail attempts in the last five years to break down what Fuss calls "the bar between essentialism and constructionism" (1990, pxii). This has implications for my reading of the

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<sup>20</sup> I am using the term hegemony to indicate the dominance of a particular ideological position, lesbian feminism, among lesbians. This dominance came to appear natural, and effectively marginalised other positions that lesbians may have wished to adopt. The term is derived from Gramsci (1971). His analysis of class domination, showed how it can be achieved politically and ideologically, usually involving enforced consent.



newsletters, which, I contend, continually assume and rarely question their assignment of originary gender-based differences as 'female=good' and 'male=bad'. At the same time they see lesbians as at the mercy of a male-dominated society that has constructed female as 'bad' and male as 'good'. This leads to the conclusion that they are 'returning' to a more 'natural', original humanity by discovering their essential lesbian identity and rejecting 'male values'. This seems to me to constitute an essentialist position, with only lip service being given to the concept of social constructionism as a factor in sexual identity. It illustrates how essentialist and constructionist theories are always entangled with each other.

Finally I examine the implications for lesbian communities of the development of the concept of lesbian identity and lesbian identity politics in New Zealand, which has been lesbian-feminist, tending toward separatist, and has effectively marginalised the viewpoints of those lesbians who do not identify with its primary hypotheses. Many lesbian feminists, not only in New Zealand but in the United States, Britain and Australia, have often been content to accept fairly essentialising notions about sex, gender, and sexuality. As a result, they have often exhibited a moralising and hierarchical attitude toward other lesbians and heterosexual women, and gay and heterosexual men. Some narrow ideas about identity circulating in lesbian communities have made their 'identity politics' correspondingly narrow and limiting. They have made some lesbians very conscious of boundaries to 'acceptable' behaviour and beliefs, often ostensibly as a defence to attacks from heterosexual and even homosexual 'enemies'. The basis of theorising has sometimes been presented as a 'natural' lesbianism, and its actually mediated and constructed nature has been disguised and confused with essentialist rhetoric.

### What do I mean by identity?

Identity is a complex concept. Personal identity is sometimes confusingly considered as both that aspect of ourselves that is unique and identifies us as individuals, and at the same time is sufficiently similar to some part of others' identities to enable an individual to identify as a member of different groups. It forms a site where the psychic and the social intersect, but is also intrinsically linked to a material body. I see identity as unstable and processual, with a continuing tension both within an individual and between an individual and the culture(s) with which he or she is interacting. This tension is related to a desire to appear unified, both to oneself and to others, because the very admission of instability may be seen as weakness or even as a sign of mental illness. However, the precariousness of identity itself continually undermines any tendency to closure or stability. This is a position which has grown from my reading of recent theorists, chiefly Fuss (1989, 1990), Cohen (1990) and Alice (forthcoming, 1996). It is the result of attempts to show the interdependence of two positions which have, at times, been considered as opposed to each other: essentialism and constructionism.

### The concept of sexual identity

How we come to understand ourselves both as individuals and as members of groups has been central to Western philosophy. Fuss (1990) explains that for Aristotle, the identity of humans, animals or inanimate objects, was the effect of the natural essence of the object – its essence being what it is and has always been and will always will be. Thus identity was a fixed expression of a central, stable, essential truth. Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" articulated an understanding of a human as a sentient individual, able to be self-reflexive, and to identify his brain as separate

from an animal's.<sup>21</sup> It also implied that physical activity is secondary to intellectual activity, because it said nothing about the material body, about identifying as a part of a group, or about the individual as a social being. As Cohen (1991) points out, for Enlightenment rationalists such as Locke, "body served to naturalise the essential and autonomous unity of the thinking being" (p77).<sup>22</sup> Thus Man is human because he thinks, and even animals can tell he is Man because of his uniquely organised body.

In the twentieth century, Freud's work established that there was a part of the psyche that influenced, or even controlled, how people thought, felt and acted, even though it could not be known or accessed.<sup>23</sup> This unconscious part of the mind, or id, he described as being shaped by experiences in infancy and childhood, and thus as unique for every individual. This led to an understanding of an individual's identity as not

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<sup>21</sup> Descartes (1596–1650) was a French philosopher, scientist and mathematician who believed that two classes of substance make up the whole of reality: thinking substances, or minds, and extended substances, or bodies – now called Cartesian dualism. Rejecting the current thinking that all knowledge could be gained by reading what the ancients had already written, he determined to hold nothing true until he had established grounds for believing it true.

I use the male pronoun deliberately here; Descartes' thinker was undoubtedly male. Even if Descartes acknowledged that women did think, they would think 'like men'; in other words the male pronoun, in contemporary usage, would have been assumed to cover women if necessary.

<sup>22</sup> Locke, John (1632–1704), English philosopher, who founded the school of empiricism, a doctrine that affirmed that all knowledge is based on experience, and denies the possibility of spontaneous ideas or a priori thought.

<sup>23</sup> Freud, Sigmund (1856–1939), Austrian physician, neurologist, and founder of psychoanalysis. Freud created an entirely new approach to the understanding of human personality by his demonstration of the existence and force of the unconscious.

necessarily 'natural', but as a product of culture rather than of biology. This began a process of questioning whether there is any such thing as 'human nature' which is universal to all times and cultures, and how 'natural' sexual divisions in human societies really were. Questioning the roles that men and women played in society has led to questioning the rigidity of sexual identification. This question of sexual identity, as Sedgwick (1990) points out, has become increasingly important to individuals as the twentieth century has progressed. Stein (1992) reports that, since the late 1960s, there has been debate between those who wish to claim that there is an essential, natural, unchangeable basis to sexual orientation, and those who believe that all behaviours must be understood contextually within the culture in which they take place.

This debate has been crucial to understandings of how and why gay and lesbian people want to claim that their 'identity' determines more than their preferred sexual behaviour. Claims to the 'naturalness' of gay identity was the basis of early gay political activity (Fuss 1990). Ironically, the use of 'identity' as a rallying call for social action unfolded at the very time when academics were beginning to realise the implications of "the death of the author",<sup>24</sup> and the beginnings of the articulation of post-structuralist thinking. Gay male theorists have been quick to follow the social constructionist theorising of Foucault, and move to analyses based in history and culture. Lesbian theorists, on the other hand, have tended to resist such moves in favour of retaining a more essentialised notion of

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<sup>24</sup> The title of an essay first published by Roland Barthes in 1968. Barthes wanted to emphasise that authorship of a text did not ensure control over any, let alone all, meanings that text could produce. He also wanted to point out that all texts are produced at a site of intersection of the influences (other texts) that the author has been subject to - it is, accordingly, impossible to produce an entirely original text.

identity. Fuss (1990) suggests that "Lesbians...may have more to lose [than gay men] by failing to subscribe to an essentialist philosophy" (p98). Certainly the defensive position that lesbians seem to frequently find themselves in has made it easy for lesbian theorists to slip into positions where essentialised notions about gender underlie theorising about 'lesbian identity' and 'identity politics'.

### Identity Politics

The concept of lesbian identity politics has been based on a claim to a natural lesbian identity, first and most clearly in the 1974 publication of the manifesto of the Combahee River Collective.<sup>25</sup> This group based their political views on their identity as black lesbian women, and described the result as "identity politics":

We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end someone else's oppression (cited in Fuss 1990, p99; my emphasis).

Fuss goes on to quote Barbara Smith, a black feminist writer, who links identity and politics together firmly with: "we have an identity and therefore a politics" (p99), a link which she points out is made without explanation or definition. However unexamined this link, the idea of 'identity politics' was one adopted enthusiastically by lesbian groups in the United States (Phelan, 1989 & 1993) and in New Zealand and Australia (Alice, forthcoming 1996).

However, both of these expressions were by Black activists, and Cohen (1991) points out the danger of eliding race and sexuality as bases of identity. Race might seem like an ideal model for an identity politics based

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<sup>25</sup> This statement was part of the Radicalesbians challenge to the homophobia of the National Organisation of Women in the United States.

on an essential nature – what could be more 'natural' than one's racial origins? However, "neither 'race' and 'sex' nor 'ethnicity' and 'gender' are isomorphic social matrices" (Cohen, 1991, p74). Each is a construction which is disputed and problematised even among the individuals who make it up. Lesbian theorists applied a concept of identity politics which was based on differences around race and sexuality or gender to an identity politics based on overly simplistic ideas about gender and sexuality. This increased the possibility that lesbian identity politics would prove inadequate to the task of providing a basis for original theorising and effective political action.

By using the notion of a stable 'lesbian identity' on which to base 'identity politics', these theorists also begged the question of where this identity comes from, whether or how it is formed or found. As Fuss (1990) suggests, there is often slippage between the notions of discovering an (already existing) identity, and constructing an identity. It is clear, as Martin (1993) reveals in her work on the 'coming-out' narratives of the 1970s, that lesbians are often uncertain whether they are finding something that has been 'buried' within themselves, or actually 'making themselves up as they go along' in response to stimuli both with their own psyches and in their environment. Sometimes theorists sidestep this confusion by talking about multiple 'identities' as a given, and going on to discuss what political use we can make of this multiplicity. However, this approach is over-simplistic. As Elaine Jeffreys (1991) points out, it can result very easily in an reduction of specific difference to a more diffuse and misleading 'sameness'. An experience of oppression can become an 'understanding' and false identification with all 'oppressed'. Instead of emphasising and valuing 'difference', it can slip into a hierarchy based on essential categories.

Adrienne Rich's famous 1980 article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" has been so crucial to the theorising of lesbian identity that it is necessary to refer to it in any discussion of lesbian identity. While Rich stakes a legitimate claim for the validity of lesbian lives, and places them in a context of heterosexist conditioning and expectations, some aspects of lesbian experience and identity are almost lost under her widening of the meaning of the word 'lesbian' to include all relationships between women which are significant to them. I am not sure that I find this concept useful, as it seems to disregard the specifically sexual element that is a large part of why I like to claim to be 'lesbian'. Similarly, Biddy Martin (1993) criticises Rich for destroying the 'difference' that is lesbianism, de-emphasising sexual pleasure/passion, and essentialising female bonding. However, Rich's vision does have the advantage of removing any natural 'privilege' adhering to heterosexuality, by seeing all sexual choices as being attached to situations rather than to essential natures.

The notion of a unified sense of identity has been centralised and made to appear an essential pre-requisite for political activity. The way that this identity was defined and developed, and the influence it came to assume over both individual and group behaviour, has continued to provide a central thread of much lesbian-feminist thinking in New Zealand, Australia and the United States. This has happened despite Fuss's assertion that the "poststructuralist climate renders all such assertions problematic" (1990, p97).

#### Deconstructing 'identity'

By the phrase "the poststructuralist climate" Fuss is referring to attempts, including her own, to show that the idea that identity is an expression of

an essential truth and the idea that identity is constructed and mediated by experience and environment are not necessarily opposing viewpoints. Indeed, she aims to "investigate what purpose or function essentialism might play in a particular set of discourses" (pxii). She wishes to show the interdependence of essentialism and constructionism and thus to release essentialist thinking from a position in feminist poststructuralist theorising in which it has become fossilised, while the social constructionist position has become valorised. She does this by attempting to "work both sides of the essentialist/constructionist binarism at once, bringing each term to its internal breaking point" (pxiii). This is the kind of technique employed by post-structuralist thinkers to gain new insights into concepts like 'identity', on which much other theorising depends.

Explosions in the meaning of 'meaning', and the deconstructive techniques that have followed, have caused shifts in thinking about epistemology. Theorists can now bring two traditionally conflicting ideas, such as 'identity' and 'difference', together in new ways, and attempt to explain that one might, in fact, explicate the other. Hence we can read a sentence that would have been unimaginable a very few decades ago:

"Deconstruction... offers...a view of identity as difference" (Fuss, 1990, pp102-3). Fuss is here glossing Derrida, for whom identity is difference. Thus, it is an individual's difference that makes her what she is. Her identity is her difference. This is not her difference from another individual, her individuality, but the difference created by the contradictions within identity, the contradictions that set up the tensions that make identity inherently unstable. It is the lurking presence of difference, of what is not present, that problematises the notion of an entrenched political position based on fixed notions of identity.



This view is taken up and reversed by Alice (forthcoming 1996), as "difference is identity". This brings the emphasis firmly onto difference, and moves away from any indication that a fiction of unity should be a priority in an understanding of identity. In emphasising difference, Alice expands the possibilities for political coalition-making. Privileging overlapping layers of 'difference', and thus possible linkages, rather than 'unity' as the basis of a search for political commonality makes it easier to envisage temporal, local kinds of political action. These insights have wide-reaching implications, as we shall see, for lesbian feminists who are trying to re-theorise identity in a less essentialised way, and for lesbians for whom the essentialised identities that marked some earlier lesbian feminist theorising have proved inadequate.

Postmodern conceptualisations of identity sometimes try to get over these difficult notions by appearing as multiple, so we might see ourselves as bundles of identities, or as unravelling bundles of temporary identities. Although this view encourages a notion of the subject as less stable, and allows for the highlighting of mediation of experience, it does not, in itself, allow for the problems of dealing with the concept of difference. The difference that Derrida, Fuss and Alice see as the basis of identity can become located between identities rather than within identities (Fuss 1990). The 'bundles of identity' approach is still prone to slippages that see difference as external to identity, rather than as intrinsic to identity itself.

The unthinking or careless use of essentialist ideas as a basis for identity in order to 'settle' what a lesbian is, is not the same as the conscious use of essentialism in order to give a framework for discussion. The phrase "the risk of essentialism" is used by both Fuss (1990) and Martin (1993) to

define such a conscious use.<sup>26</sup> Phelan (1993) quotes Spivak as saying that "a central lesson of deconstruction is that we cannot avoid being essentialist; rather we must work on a heightened consciousness of the effects of and the ways in which our essentialisms function" (p786). Diana Fuss proposes of the cautious use of what she calls "nominal essence" (1990, p4). She distinguishes this from "real essence", which is a kind of 'essential essence'; "nominal essence" is merely a "linguistic convenience".<sup>27</sup> By pushing the bases of both essentialist and constructionist thinking beyond earlier analyses, Fuss and Alice have demonstrated how each actually depends on the other, and works to displace each other at certain points.

As I have said, Fuss has demonstrated that essentialist and constructionist ideas are always very entangled with each other, and in fact ultimately depend on each other. Stein points out in his conclusion to *Forms of Desire* (1992), for example, an essentialist might be a voluntarist. In other words, they might believe that it is possible to choose one's innate sexual orientation, perhaps as the result of an early sexual encounter which was pleasurable. To take the example of a lesbian theorist, Sheila Jeffreys claims that the basis of her ideas, which are highly influential in some lesbian feminist circles in New Zealand, is constructionist, presumably because she feels as if she has stepped outside a framework of heterosexual expectations. Alice (forthcoming 1996) reveals them to actually depend on very essentialising views of 'gender', hence they slip into moralising, prescriptive hierarchies of feminism, yet privilege certain definitions of

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<sup>26</sup> According to Cohen, the phrase "the risk of essence may have to be taken" first appeared in an article by Stephen Heath, called "difference", published in 1979.

<sup>27</sup> Fuss credits John Locke with the origin of this distinction.

lesbianism. This is also true of many contributors to the lesbian newsletters.

What, then, can be usefully said about deconstructed notions of identity as a basis for notions of community? By emphasising the uniqueness of an individual's mind, Freud validated the idea of individual creativity (Rorty 1989). He also opened the way for theories later in the century which would de-stabilise meaning and expand the possibilities for interpretation of any text, word or idea almost to infinity. Thus Fuss can now point out the irony that 'identity' "is rarely identical to itself but instead has multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings" (1990, p98). Instead of envisaging identity as unitary and stable, as traditional thinkers have done, she posits identity as fluid, unstable, and responsive. Instead of being the attribute that can be depended on through an individual's life, one's identity becomes an agent of change. It does not suggest that identity can be relied on as a basis for action or contemplation, rather that it is unbounded and can be understood as potentially infinite.

Perhaps the most useful thing that can be said about identity is that it "must be continually assumed and contested, that differences must be located within identity...differences are integral to identity" (Alice, forthcoming 1996). This is in marked contrast to earlier lesbian writers, who often assumed identity unproblematically; it has been the contestation that has often been ignored in lesbian theory. In a desire to affirm the difference that marks the lesbian from the heterosexual woman, the differences between lesbians and the differences within lesbians have been ignored. The identity which has been assumed has tended to be repressive, homogenous, and ahistorical, and has led to a restricted and moralistic

identity politics.

### 'Assuming' identity

'Assuming identity' is necessary for us as human actors. Freud revealed the source of human creativity; perhaps our greatest creation, never finished, is our selves, what Fuss calls our "fictions of identity" (1990, p104). It may not always be easy or comfortable to be continually problematising and questioning the basis of identity, but given the status that 'identity' has assumed in modern movements for racial, sexual and social equality, it can no longer be taken for granted as an expression of an essential nature. Martin (1993) comments that it is a privilege to be able to question the existence of lesbian identity. Boundaries and 'limits', she observes, can be eschewed only by those who do not need them, who do not feel threatened by invisibility with their removal. Within the New Zealand lesbian newsletters, concepts of visibility and image have created a constant tension, while the issues of identity have gone largely unchallenged. I will expand on how these issues emerged in the newsletters in Chapter Four.

### What is a lesbian?

Before I go on to discuss the effects of lack of questioning of 'identity' in lesbian political theory, I want to discuss what is signified by the use of the word 'lesbian' in the phrase 'lesbian identity politics'. As a group, lesbians in New Zealand, as elsewhere, have been pathologised and monsterised, both in the press and in professional publications<sup>28</sup>. Alison

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<sup>28</sup> See the earlier example in this study, from the *NZ Truth*. See also an article by Sims in the *NZ Listener* 14 May, 1977, claiming that lesbianism in Christchurch Women's Prison is confined to "a small group of young Polynesian women, immature and disturbed, who have known no other home."

Laurie and Julie Glamuzina (1991) discuss this pathologising discourse in New Zealand in the 1950s, and how it served to increase awareness of the existence of lesbians. The way this discourse served the very people it attempted to deny is also very clearly spelled out by Glamuzina's discussion of a 1960s murder trial (1992).<sup>29</sup> Monsterising of lesbians is not unknown within feminism, and within the gay movement, as well as within society more generally.<sup>30</sup> Even when lesbians are acknowledged more positively, they may not be separated from gay men even in areas where they are clearly different.<sup>31</sup> This increases feelings of invisibility among lesbians.

In the lesbian newsletters that circulated in New Zealand, the word 'lesbian' was not used often in the early seventies, although *Circle* was described on its cover as "A Lesbian Feminist Publication". Instead, the phrase "gay and bisexual women" was common. However, by 1978, 'lesbian' had become the

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See also a booklet by Jocelyn Roberts, published by the Dept of Justice in 1972, concerning a study of borstal girls. Lesbianism is continually linked to criminal activity; the main tasks of adolescent girls, according to the writer, include "accepting and learning a socially approved adult feminine social role," and "preparing for marriage and family life".

<sup>29</sup> In her story/article/memoir, Julie Glamuzina reveals how the "dangerous role models and frightening images" that the New Zealand press reported on the few occasions that lesbians appeared in the news nevertheless served to inform lesbians that they were not alone. In her words, a murder case involving two lesbian women in the Air Force in 1967 "first gave [her] the word 'lesbian'" (p111).

<sup>30</sup> The events surrounding the United Women's Conventions at Christchurch in 1977 and at Hamilton in 1979, the Women's Liberation Caucus at Piha in 1978, and the debacle when the lesbian workers at *Broadsheet* walked out in 1978, some of which is discussed in Chapter Six, make it clear that heterosexual feminists in New Zealand had great difficulty accommodating lesbian feminism as it began to assume its identity.

<sup>31</sup> For example, an article by a gay man in the *Listener* in August of 1992, ostensibly about advertisers targeting "lesbians and gay men", was actually about advertisers targeting gay men who have a high disposable income. It even included the information that lesbian couples have, on average, less spending power than heterosexual couples, while continuing to talk about "lesbians and gay men" being targeted.

only word used to delineate *Circle's* audience. This mirrors the rise in the hegemony of lesbian feminism as the most visible face of lesbianism in New Zealand. With a complex mixture of defensiveness, essentialist thinking, and a peculiarly puritan view of sexual expression, some lesbian feminists built a position where they could claim to dominate theorising about what it meant to live a lesbian life. Phelan (1989) details the process of development of lesbian feminist politics in the United States, and many of these developments were followed in New Zealand.

This rise of lesbian feminism in New Zealand, as in the United States, Britain and Australia, was a movement distinct from mainly social groupings of lesbians, from radical feminism and from the gay rights movement. An article in *Circle 30* (1978) sees it as a 'natural' outcome of raised consciousness. There is a wealth of reporting in the *Circles* (eg *Circle 30*, pp13-18) from these years on the benefits of consciousness-raising as a tool to increase political awareness. While not denying the importance to the feminist movement of consciousness-raising groups, there is no doubt that they were a tool to enforce homogeneity and collectivise identity (Elaine Jeffreys, 1991, Phelan 1989). By the time that Adrienne Rich published "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", New Zealand lesbian feminists had already set in place the boundaries and limits of what they would generally allow to be called 'lesbian'. Alice (forthcoming 1996) defines this as a New Zealand example of "cultural feminism". This included a belief that women, 'naturally' nurturing, warm, and loving, were intrinsically better than men, who were 'naturally' aggressive, domineering, and rapine.<sup>32</sup> It was even extended to a belief that women were the original

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<sup>32</sup> See Echols (1983) and Alcoff (1988) for detailed discussion of the many positions on these issues within 'cultural feminism'.

('good') humans and males were a later ('bad') mutation<sup>33</sup>. This kind of essentialist thinking is extremely resistant to critique; it presents itself with all the authority of religious dogma.

The ideals of cultural feminism attempted to exclude 'abnormal', 'male-identified' behaviour from personal relationships – and indeed, from lesbian life in general. The very narrow range of behaviours which were 'approved of' led to a de-sexualizing of lesbianism. The very thing that marked lesbians off from 'normal' society, preference for sexual relationships with women, was de-emphasised in favour of the cultural feminist ideals described above. This was not done in a bid for middle-class lesbian respectability – in fact many lesbian feminists were very concerned with being visible and even socially transgressive: political graffiti, for example, was commonly practised, and a group of Wellington women fought vigorously to use the word 'lesbian' instead of 'gay women' in a standing advertisement in the personal column of *The Evening Post*.<sup>34</sup> Rather it was a turning away from what was seen as a male concern with the sexual, in favour of what was seen as a more female concern with the emotional.

This was a clear move. United States writers such as Feinberg (1993) and Davis and Kennedy (1992) describe highly sexualized lesbian lifestyles in the 1950s and 60s, as does Laurie in her memoirs of a New Zealand lesbian published in *Broadsheet* in 1985.<sup>35</sup> "The life" was clearly based on sexual

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<sup>33</sup> I heard this view expressed as a result of serious research at a Matriarchy study group as recently as 1993.

<sup>34</sup> *Circle 30*, 1978.

<sup>35</sup> Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* is a novel about a working class lesbian in the pre-feminist and early feminist days; Davis & Kennedy's "They was No One to Mess With" is an historical account of a pre-feminist lesbian working-class community.

rituals;<sup>36</sup> these were increasingly downplayed by many lesbian feminists in the 1970s and were replaced by the image of the Amazon Warrior and narratives of Romantic friendship. Martin (1993) comments on the dominance of lesbian feminism in the United States coming-out narratives from the 1970s onward, and on the

conception of lesbianism and of life story as a journey, as a 'metaethical' journey à la Mary Daly from patriarchal distortion to a woman-identified consciousness (p281).

Alison Laurie remembers being in Denmark in 1975, on an evening when her gentle sexual advance had been rejected as "behaving like a man". She reflects: "[T]here was something happening now that wasn't what I thought I'd fought to achieve. Something uptight, critical, rejecting" (*Broadsheet* 135, p30).

In New Zealand, this emergence of a identifiably dominant group of lesbian feminists occurred at a time when the splits between heterosexual feminists and lesbians were sometimes turning into open antagonism. Lesbians, denied a place in the Women's Movement on their own terms, retorted by labelling mainstream feminists "reformist", and damning them for their continued dependence on male approval and institutions (*Circle* 26, pp8-11).<sup>37</sup> There is evidence of a certain pride in their own "radical" stand, a position from which men were not only not needed but were positively excluded.

Relations between lesbian feminists and heterosexual feminists in New Zealand continued to be strained, and a strong thread of lesbian feminist

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<sup>36</sup> This phrase, used to describe the social life of lesbians and gay men, seems to have been traditional in many countries. Laurie uses it, as do Faderman (1991) and Feinberg (1993).

<sup>37</sup> The newsletter reporting of these events is described in more detail in Chapter Six below. See also Phelan (1989), Chapter Four, for an overview of the same processes in the United States.



thinking still implies that heterosexual and bisexual women are not 'real' feminists. There is sometimes an attempt to claim all 'womanly' virtues as only available to lesbians, who are not 'tainted' by dealings with men.<sup>38</sup> Phelan (1993) points out that there is a strand of lesbian life which is always looking for 'signs' that heterosexual women may be on the verge of 'coming out'. She points out the slippage between feminism and lesbianism, which is distressingly common in my experience, by focusing on the slippage between 'tomboy' and 'baby dyke': "Being a tomboy is not an indicator of lesbianism except to those who believe that real women do not climb trees" (p775).

One of the characteristics of the elision of lesbian identity with lesbian feminism was the marginalisation of lesbians who were mothers, especially of sons, or who identified as gay or bisexual – once a main strand of visible lesbian life.<sup>39</sup> This was accompanied by a corresponding centralisation, even sanctification, of separatist ideals. While this may be seen as a natural defence to a label of deviance (Jagose 1988a), its actual effect was to leave very little space for lesbian women who considered themselves feminists, but rejected the most radical ideas of lesbian feminism and of lesbian separatism.<sup>40</sup> It is possible that many, perhaps even the majority of women who preferred to relate sexually to other women, did not feel that their concerns were central to the agendas of lesbian feminism. The basis of lesbian identity, and of lesbian identity politics, was a narrow, essentialised

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<sup>38</sup> There will be more detail backing up my claims on these issues in Chapters Four to Six.

<sup>39</sup> In the first year or two of *Circle*, although the cover claims it to be a "Lesbian Feminist" publication, its readers are often referred to as "Gay and bisexual women" (eg *Circle* 5, pp4-5).

<sup>40</sup> I will discuss Jagose's ideas in greater detail in Chapter Three

idea of what a lesbian might be. This led lesbian feminists who accepted that identity to privilege unity and homogeneity over than difference, and thus put boundaries around what they called 'the lesbian community', ignoring and eliding difference among, between and within themselves.

Of course, the emergence of lesbian feminism as a little-contested basis of lesbian identity was happening against a background of social activism. Like the rest of the Western World, New Zealand in the 1970s was being forced to examine its social arrangements in a way that it had never done before. The pressure from groups in the community who saw a need for reform could not be resisted, and huge changes to legislation in areas of personal relationships and control of bodies were being debated.<sup>41</sup>

Another strand in the building of lesbian identity in New Zealand can be seen in the relations between lesbian feminism and the gay rights movement. Gay Liberation in New Zealand was begun by Maori lesbian Ngahua Te Awekotuku in 1972. But by 1973, Alison Laurie (1985b) reports that the gay movement did not necessarily feel itself to need lesbian involvement: "We were all beaten up at a party by drunken gay misogynists, and everyone ended up feeling it was quite impossible to work with any of the men" (p30). Against this background of distrust and even fear, it is probably notable that many lesbian feminists (including Laurie herself) were prepared to work with gay men in the early 1980s through to the 1990s on the issues of Homosexual Law Reform and Human Rights

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<sup>41</sup> The right of women to have a safe, legal abortion was a political football for over ten years from 1970, the right of women to leave their violent husbands without suffering loss of matrimonial property was not taken into legislation until the late sixties, and then grudgingly, and the right of adolescents to sexual and contraceptive education and advice, although legal since 1990, is still not entirely accepted.

legislation. It may be significant that New Zealand lesbians have not been vigorously involved in coalitions with gay men around HIV/AIDS which, as Alice (forthcoming 1996) points out, may not be considered as directly political an issue in New Zealand as it has been in other countries, such as the United States. While some lesbian feminists are prepared to do political battle with men, they may not be prepared to give them emotional energy.

The position of lesbian-feminist theory on bisexuality has hardened into an implacable stance against bisexual women, who are considered to gain from their 'heterosexual privilege'. All assumptions about lesbian identity made by lesbian feminists rest on the premise that lesbians do not have sexual relationships with men, thus the lesbian community is considered 'closed' to the influence of men. When lesbian identity is discussed in these terms, it seems to become more concerned with how involved women are with men, rather than the quality and nature of their relationships with women.

Probably the greatest difficulty faced by lesbian feminists in New Zealand, however, has been the allowing for the differences that arise around race and racism. Laurie's (1992) claim that

the visible lesbian communities of Auckland and Wellington of the late 1950s and early 1960s were predominantly Maori and working-class...and this history has been insufficiently acknowledged by the mainly Pakeha and middle-class lesbians who became prominent in the mid 1970s (p47)

holds true. For all the anti-racism rhetoric that has been raised by lesbian feminists on the doubly marginalised position of Maori women, the strongly pro-'female' and anti-'male' essentialism that has characterised lesbian-feminist thinking has lead many Maori women to impossible dilemmas when they have tried to work with lesbian-feminist ideals in anti-racist

endeavours which involved men.<sup>42</sup>

The boundaries set around 'lesbian identity' by some lesbian feminists in New Zealand have generally held strongly, and published critiques have not been common. Alice (forthcoming 1996) points out that the 'gender trouble' of the women who continue to identify as gay, butch-femme or liked to crossdress could have provided the basis for a critique of cultural feminism.<sup>43</sup> Instead, lesbian life, dominated by the hegemony of lesbian-feminist women who want to claim a stable 'lesbian identity', has so marginalised these women that they have rarely been heard. There is little indication in writing by New Zealand lesbians of the possibility of varieties of ways to live as a lesbian. Looking more closely at the concepts 'identity politics', and 'lesbian identity politics' in the light of what we have already seen about the assumptions and actual complexities of 'lesbian identity', reveal what can be useful about this notion.

#### The 'politics' of 'identity politics'

Perhaps the most apposite question to ask here is what is meant by politics in the phrase "identity politics"? 'Politics' is one of the overarching metanarratives of the so-called democratic cultures. It is often visualised as a 'hidden force', against which individuals are powerless; octopus-like, its

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<sup>42</sup> Some examples of these dilemmas as reported in the newsletters are reported in Chapter Four.

<sup>43</sup> "Butch-femme" refers to the particular style adopted by many working-class lesbian women until the 1970s in countries including Britain, United States and New Zealand. Although vilified by many lesbian feminists, who indicated their political stance by a more androgynous appearance (see Chapter 4 below), there has been a resurgence of interest in the butch-femme aesthetic in the 1990s. This is partly as a result of autobiographical writing by Feinberg, Pratt, Nestle and others, and partly as a result of the publication of oral histories of working class lesbian communities, such as that by Davis and Kennedy.

tentacles apparently reach into every corner of our lives. As Fuss points out, "the very noun 'politics'...is irreducibly cast in the plural" (1990, p105). It is probably even less theorised or understood than the term 'identity', but it is hugely significant in terms of the rhetoric of lesbian identity.

As politics are so closely linked to identity in the minds of lesbian feminists, and identity is seen in such narrow, essentialist terms, questions such as "What are her politics?" mitigate against a feeling of politics as a social construct that we are responsible for. They indicate an essential quality to 'politics' that, of course, it does not have. It is, very clearly, a socially constructed concept. Fuss (1990) points out that "efforts" to interrogate "the unstated political assumptions governing a given text" "must often rely on the self-evident importance of politics, on an essentialism of the political, in order to do so" (p107). She points out that allowing politics to assume this kind of significance mitigates against any usefulness of identity politics. It is more useful to visualise politics as "a 'set of effects' rather than as the concealed motor which sets all social relations into motion" (p106).

Seeing politics as a 'set of effects' means that individuals and groups can participate in these effects. It puts the emphasis on those taking part who create the effects, rather than on a system in the control of a few distant individuals called politicians. But to create a 'set of effects' which would express the political needs and desires of a community, it might be necessary to have a theory of identity for that community which would acknowledge itself as shifting, and contingent, and generally unreliable.

Phelan (1993) raises the notion that the only identity that matters is that which answers a political need. Instead of this, she says, an alleged 'superiority' of lesbian life has been turned into "the basis of codes for authentic lesbian existence and identity" (p765-6). Seemingly endless strictures and concerns about 'political correctness' become meaningless if replaced by a consensual sense of what might be 'politically effective'. Fuss, however, questions the need to assess every theory about sexual identity by its usefulness or otherwise to political activism or theorising. Although she admits it is a strategy she has often used herself, she questions whether a theory must stand or fall, be validated or refuted, by how politically useful it might be - by how well it contributes to identity politics. There may be other criteria for assessing its usefulness, such as how well it helps people understand themselves in relationships.

There is no doubt that theorising about identity may have political outcomes. The most obvious example is the debate about what 'causes' homosexuality, which begs the question whether it can be 'cured' or prevented. I recently heard a radio interview with a biologist who claims to have isolated a 'gay gene' in men, but even he would not state categorically that it 'caused' homosexuality. The most he would admit was that it might predispose some of its carriers toward homosexual behaviour. The wish to find a 'scientific' basis for sexual identity is strong, among homosexuals as well as heterosexuals, although few people now would deny the influence of social forces on the individual. "Most laypeople," Stein (1992) points out, "are essentialist in some ways and constructionist in others" (p8).

However, I agree with Fuss that the fact that theorising about identity may

produce ideas that seem politically useless, or even dangerous, should not prevent us from continuing to write and think about these ideas. It might be helpful to parents of gay men and lesbians, for example, at some points, to understand that their children's 'identity' is not related to their upbringing, and may be 'caused by' factors of genetics. In another arena, this belief could lead to attempts to 'diagnose' and abort babies with a particular genetic marker.

### Dealing with 'difference'

I would like to return now to the issue of difference raised by Alice's statement that it is difference that constitutes identity, in the sense that it is the negotiation of our differences that underpins and links who we think and perform ourselves to be at any given time. The basic problem with the conceptions of identity that have formed the basis for lesbian identity politics is that the illusion of a unitary identity has been bought at the price of the suppression of difference. 'Identity', as in the constructions 'lesbian identity' and 'lesbian identity politics', has been taken to mean 'presenting a single face to the world'. That face has been usually white, avowedly feminist and even anti-male, rather androgynous, frequently non-sexual, and often, as Phelan comments, superior in its conception of itself within feminism and within lesbianism.

In 1983 Cherie Moraga attempted to revise and expand the concept of identity politics to include the acknowledgement by the oppressed of her "'identity' as oppressor as well" (cited in Fuss 1990, p99). While making a clear point about the superiority of white lesbian feminism and its reluctance to acknowledge difference, both racial and in terms of sexual expression, within its concept of lesbian identity, Moraga is still affirming

the necessity of an identity-based politics.<sup>44</sup> In fact, in her 1981 collaboration with Amber Hollibaugh, she saw that this might be based in a return to the consciousness-raising groups that had formed the original basis of the feminist movement.<sup>45</sup> This would mean lesbians who were feminists could "create sexual theory in the same way we created feminist theory" (p252-3), as grounded theory, read through and always incorporating the lived experiences of particular women.

However, she sees this consciousness-raising as not directed by pre-scripted, prescriptive 'norms'. Unlike the consciousness-raising groups that formed the beginnings of the current theorising about feminism, she wants to see groups which value and incorporate multiple differences around identity. This is the kind of useful political outcome of theorising identity as based in difference rather than unity: a community that might see itself based on acceptance rather than limitations. It could lead to an identity politics that emphasised the instability and open-endedness that leads to growth in understanding and a wealth of political alliances.

It was in these consciousness-raising groups, the significance of which has been already discussed, that the phrase "the personal is the political" first became current. Fuss (1990) acknowledges "the historical importance of a slogan which galvanised and energised a entire political movement" (p101). However, its decline into the limiting concepts of 'politically correct' (PC) and 'politically unsound' (PUS) was rapid and virtually unquestioned in

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<sup>44</sup> Moraga is a self-identified "butch queer" (1992, 248) Chicana who challenges the hegemony of white lesbian feminism while believing in the necessity of theorising about sexuality "in a broad-based, cross-cultural way" (253).

<sup>45</sup> This article was reprinted in 1992 in Joan Nestle's *Persistent Desire* and referred to in the footnote above.



many lesbian-feminist communities in New Zealand, Australia, the United States and Britain. The groups that Moraga imagined as valuing difference and creating new sexual theories for lesbians have never happened in New Zealand.

In contrast with Alice, who rejects identity politics in favour of broad-based affinities and coalitions, Lisa Hall (1993) continues to affirm the importance of identity politics, but as composed of "layered identities" and able to form "a web of overlapping networks" that will be politically potent. She sees "the personal is the political", then, as a way of making the connections: "...we are the world, we're just not all of it" (p218). She continues by unpacking the phrase, claiming that it doesn't mean that the personal is entirely overlaid by the political, or that "the political begins and ends with the political", or that "personal change is equivalent to political change per se" (p222).

Fuss (1990), however, feels the phrase has far too often been taken far too literally, effectively evacuating all meaning from both the political and the personal. She even quotes Bourne (1987) to the effect that this has resulted in "a stunted, inward-looking and self-righteous 'politics' which sets its face against politics out there in the real world" (p101). Certainly, as I will detail in later chapters, this has been the effect of the application of the phrase in New Zealand lesbian communities. I am inclined to agree with Fuss and Bourne that this phrase has developed connotations so negative that attempts such as Hall's to resuscitate it are destined to fail. We must continue to insist on bringing ourselves, our personal lives, needs and desires, into the political realm, because the personal is political. But that is not all it is. The history of the use of this phrase suggests that

the two concepts have, in practise, each acted as a limit on the other.

Living as a gay or lesbian person in a contemporary Western society necessarily involves what Fuss calls "certain political effects" (p101), but does not, in itself, constitute a political action. Both Fuss and Hall agree that identity politics need to be 'repoliticised'. Hall feels this can be done by using her theory of 'layered identities', while Fuss suggests the re-visioning of politics as a 'set of effects'. However, both agree that the political effects of actions need to be considered, not simply groups' structures or strategies themselves. Simply spending the day in bed with a women can not, by even the longest stretch of the imagination, be considered a political act.

#### Sexual practice

It may seem strange that I have been discussing sexual identity for this entire chapter, and have not specifically mentioned sexual practice until now. One of the earliest casualties of the hegemony of lesbian feminism and the dictum of "the personal is the political" was, as we have seen, the investment of lesbian lives with sexual significance. Biddy Martin (1993) asks why the personal/political axis immediately attempted to exclude elements of the sexual. It was as if theorists in the 1970s elided the passionate into their idealisation of the political. As the expression of human sexuality is still largely controlled by the parameters of male sexual desire, lesbians, in attempting to escape heterosexual definition, have conflated 'sexual' with 'heterosexual', and tried to avoid it completely.<sup>46</sup> English lesbian-feminist theorists, Jenny and Celia Kitzinger (1993), for

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<sup>46</sup> As Naomi Wolf (1991) remarks, "What little girls learn is not the desire for the other, but the desire to be desired" (p53).

example, comment that it is wrong to suggest that lesbian feminists are not interested in sexual pleasure. They claim: "We are not *opposed* to pleasure (on the contrary, we like it very much when we can get it!)" (p23). This implies that 'it' has to be looked for, that finding 'it' is a task to be undertaken, and it seems to me to imply that 'it' is as a non-necessary adjunct to normal life, rather than an ongoing part of it.

The reality is that it is often, perhaps even commonly, sexual passion that leads women to identify as lesbian, that is, to 'come out'. If 'coming out' is the process of questioning a previously taken-for-granted heterosexuality, this might imply that the opposite, that of deciding one wishes to enter a heterosexual relationship after time spent assuming a homosexual identity, would have to be called "going back", and indeed, it is. As the choice to be(come) a lesbian has been seen as an discovering an essential quality in oneself within New Zealand lesbian communities, women who have related to women and now relate to men are referred to as having gone back to men. This implies not only that to choose woman-identification is a forward step, but also (as in the phrases 'back home' or 'back safely') that being a lesbian takes one away from the 'safety' of heterosexual life, into what might be outlaw territory. This has implications for lesbian identity to be seen as being in opposition to society, as I will discuss in Chapter Three.

Along with the difficulty for some lesbian feminists of finding what lesbians could consider an 'authentic' sexual expression on which to base a unitary 'identity', the rejection of heterosexuality, combined with an essentialist view of 'coming out', has also lead to an attempt to sever lesbians from the lives they lead 'before'. Martin (1993) points out that centralising lesbian experience as the ultimate expression of lesbianism in the 1970s 'coming out'

narratives effectively erases heterosexual experience, creating a personal loss for those women who had previously lived as heterosexuals, by implying that one identity must be bought at the cost of the other. She speculates that attempting to erase contradiction strengthens a dependence on the idea of unitary lesbian identity.

It is certainly my experience that a woman who now identifies as lesbian, even if she previously identified as heterosexual and lived as a wife in a nuclear family, is expected or encouraged to have re-organised her memories to show that she was always 'really' a lesbian. This is expected by heterosexual people as well as lesbians. When I first began to identify as a lesbian, or come out', I was constantly asked by workmates and even quite casual acquaintances if I thought there had always been 'signs' that I wasn't really heterosexual. And, for a while, I believed there had been. But, as Phelan (1993) points out, to claim that I was 'really' a lesbian all that time is to deny the significance much of my experience, from childhood through adolescence to the first twenty years of my adulthood. Cohen comments that to

attempt to create ourselves as 'becoming' [lesbian or gay] seems to offer an important advantage for imagining how to use 'personal' (e)motions to engender political movements that validate the power of personal/political affect(ion)s (p88).

This seems to me to be an important insight into how post-structuralist notions of identity might interact with one's desires, and continually affirm individuality while 'making a difference' politically. It effectively counters the idea of 'coming out' as a move toward an essential truth about one's identity by emphasising a shift in understanding and its possibilities rather than the direction of that shift and its presumed consequences for both the past and the future of the individual's identity. The identity in which this 'identity politics' is based is a fluid and responsive self-creation.

The antithesis of Cohen's vision can be revealed in the most rigid view of lesbian identity politics, revealed by such sources as *Dykes-Loving-Dykes* (1990).<sup>47</sup> The writers warn lesbians not to give energy to 'straight' women, as that energy will be then used on men (and, by implication, wasted). This reflects a view of love and caring as linear, like water – once you've given it, it's gone. There is no sense of the truth that every lover, mother, and good friend learns: loving opens up possibilities; the more you give the more you get. It also assumes closed boundaries within which lesbian love and energy must be conserved, in the words of *LIP 20*, "rigid lines" that are "drawn around the lesbian community to protect pure lesbian space" (p13). This use of the concept of 'purity' denies lesbians any viable identity in families, workplaces and communities.

I would not wish to be a part of any community that was constructed along the lines of 'purity' or any principle of exclusion. It is a measure of how 'outside' of family and mainstream social life individual lesbians feel they are placed, when theories based on fixed, defensive notions of identity can gain wide credence. I agree with Shane Phelan's words

Our politics...must consist of continued patient and impatient struggle with ourselves and with those within and without our 'communities' who seek to 'fix' us (in the many senses of that term) (1993, p786).

The nature of these communities, their difficulties and their possibilities, will be the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>47</sup> This book (Jo, Strega & Ruston) is subtitled *Dyke Separatist Politics, For Lesbians Only*. One of the authors (Ruston) is a Pakeha New Zealander; the other two are white dykes from the United States. Although most of its contents seem rooted in personal anger and a structuralist, essentialist, brand of separatism, it has been influential in shaping the thinking of many lesbians in New Zealand. The ideas in it are simple, and are presented authoritatively.

## **Chapter Three:**

### **Identity politics in lesbian communities**

#### Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the relationships between communities based on essentialist notions of 'identity', and 'community' based on deconstructed views of what identities might be. Lesbian communities based on a notion of community that is rooted in a naturalised lesbian identity often see themselves as 'outside' the dominant community, and even in opposition to it. They envisage their identity as the opposite of all that they see the wider society validating, such as material security or success in a career. The reaction of some lesbians to pathologising discourses they may have encountered, or to their invisibility, is to normalise their own lifestyle, and to centralise separatist ideas. The development of political viewpoints based on narrow, fixed identity must always be limited by its essential adherence to a 'correct' outcome. On the other hand, less structured ideas about identity and more processual notions of how communities are both created by and create their members could lead to lesbians feeling that they can play a more effective public role in more aspects of their lives.

I want to begin by asking why lesbians would want a community at all. Lisa Hall suggests that "lesbian events and 'communities' have been conceived of

as 'safe places,' as homes" (p224). So the desire for a community is the desire for a place where you will always be able to go, will always be accepted, will always be safe. However, as she also points out

Family is where we learn the deepest, most painful lessons about love, power and abuse; sisterhood is a complicated mixture of love, jealousy and profound betrayal, and all of this is played out when we make political and social communities into family (p224).

Realistically, she advises that "If you look for home in a coalition, you will always get hurt" (p224). Unless you wish to limit 'your community' to a very few close personal friends, you cannot use 'community' to hide from the world.

Jagose (1988a) claims that the lesbian subculture

exists...to protect and support lesbians from the dominant culture's heterosexism and homophobia and create a space where their lesbian identity is not only unquestioned but accepted as normal (p178).

Jagose's argument depends on the acceptance of "lesbian identity" as a 'natural' characteristic of lesbians. As I have already shown, this is an 'essentialising move', as it depends on a naturalising and simplifying of a concept that is very much a product of its environment, and inevitably complex. If she is saying that lesbian communities "protect and support lesbians", then she is making a claim that I think is often not supported by the evidence. Of course, in an ideal world, everyone would be supported and protected by their community, but lesbians, as some lesbian feminists has constantly refused to acknowledge, are a diverse, eclectic grouping. The subculture in New Zealand that has grown up and identified itself as 'the lesbian community' does not often acknowledge this, so intent are its members on defending their notion of what 'lesbian' means.

## Deviance

As I have already discussed, lesbian identity in New Zealand as well as in other countries has been largely formed in response to a pathologising of lesbianism by the dominant culture. Jagose (1988a) discusses the effects of these roots on the texts that lesbians produce, and she begins by offering a useful framework of how she sees concepts of deviance work:

Deviance concepts are a method of sorting people into groups according to characteristics they hold in common which distinguish them from the larger body of society, which, in turn, is deemed 'moral' (p177).

She cites "the dominant ideology's heterosexism" as the cause of the 'deviance' of lesbians; following Fuss (1990, p107)) I would add the homophobia of individuals in "the larger body of society" as another factor. Individual lesbians may be unaware of, or uninterested in, politically-based analyses of heterosexism; they are likely to feel more directly influenced by homophobic reactions, or the fear of homophobic reactions, than by the hegemony of heterosexism.<sup>48</sup>

I find Fuss's (1991) deconstruction of inside/outside and Sedgwick's (1990) deconstruction of hetero/homo to be useful in demonstrating that the task of the 'deviant' community is actually to limit and define the dominant hegemony. The 'outside' can be seen as containing an 'excess', as well as demonstrating a 'lack', whether it refers to the female/male dichotomy, the homo/hetero dichotomy, or the various racial dichotomies of non-white/white. The 'other' or 'outer', in this schema, operates to protect the 'centre' from a clear knowledge of its own inadequacies, which can safely be projected 'out' and away.

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<sup>48</sup> For example, see the comments on the effect on 'non-political' lesbians in New Zealand of the petition against homosexual law reform in 1987, which I discuss in Chapter Six.



However, as much as lesbians might like to think they are 'outside' the dominant hegemony, they are inextricably tied to their own culture. In the introduction to the book *Outwrite: Lesbianism and Popular Culture*, Griffin includes a diagram, here reproduced as Fig. 1 (next page).

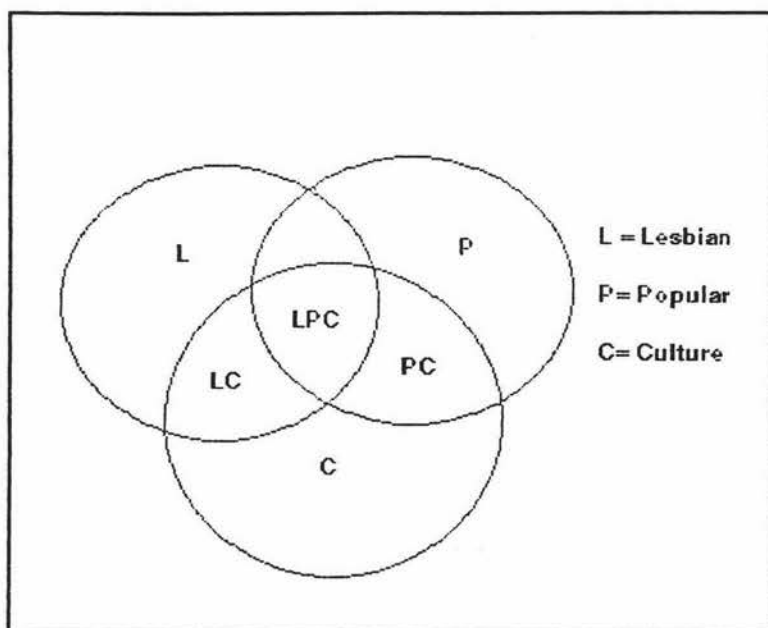


Figure 1: Griffin (1993, p2).

It is not clear why Griffin sees 'popular' as not being a part of the whole that is 'culture'. What part of the 'popular' is outside of culture? Similarly, what part of 'lesbian' is outside of 'culture'? A more useful rendering of this diagram (see Fig. 2, next page)

would acknowledge that lesbians, while they may feel they are 'outside' the dominant culture, cannot escape its influence, even if their most common reaction to it is against it.

#### Validation by 'outsiders' of themselves

Denials, such as Griffin's, that lesbians are inextricably tied into their culture are not uncommon in lesbian popular writing. There are a myriad of science fiction texts which envisage planets or bounded communities in earth's future where lesbians are the only inhabitants, romance idylls set on lesbian-only islands, and even otherwise realist novels where every

character is lesbian and interaction with the dominant culture is minimal.<sup>49</sup> These reveal a common fantasy of separatism. Although many novels do take place in the 'real world', few texts reflect a pride in 'difference', with an acknowledgement of what

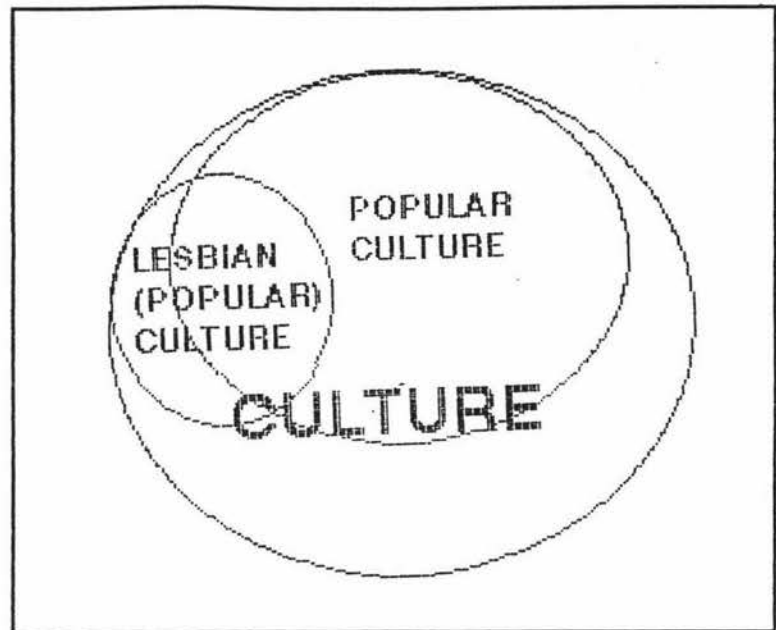


Figure 2: Lesbian Popular Culture re-vised

lesbians might share with the dominant ideology and contribute to it.<sup>50</sup>

The ultimate expression of 'outsiderness', the adoption of a separatist lifestyle, has not been popular among actual material lesbians, although the ideals of separatism always underpin the stated ideals of lesbian feminism. In a sense, to paraphrase Katie King, "Separatism is lesbian feminism's

<sup>49</sup> To take only a tiny number of the most popular examples in each grouping: *Daughters of a Coral Dawn* (Forrest, 1984), and the Isis series (Stewart, 1990-95), extremely popular United States science fiction fantasies; *Passion Bay* and *Saving Grace* (Fulton 1993 & 1994), New Zealand-Pacific Island resort fantasies; *The Fires of Bride* (Galford 1986), set on a remote Scottish Island, and virtually all the stories and novels of Lee Lynch.

<sup>50</sup> A rare example would be Newport's *Sparks do Fly*, the story of a lesbian concert pianist. Also, the Stoner McTavish series of novels (Dreher, 1985-1995) present main characters who, while they express and display a clearly defined identity as lesbians, interact almost exclusively with heterosexual characters.

Magical Sign".<sup>51</sup> This is especially underlined by the novelistic convention of separatist worlds as almost problem-free - threats are almost always perceived as coming from 'outside' the world of women-loving-women. Theories which posit women as the original humans, and men as mutants, encourage the idea of the 'naturalism' of the separatist choice, even if only as an ideal fantasies.

Although most lesbian feminists make no serious attempt to actually live separately, the construction of a community with barriers to protect lesbians from 'contamination' or unwanted incursion by the dominant culture has been a prime task of some lesbian feminists. Martin (1993) sees the early (1970s) publication of a type of autobiographical writing generally called "coming-out stories" as crucial in this process. She sees lesbians depending on these texts for "self-worth, identity and a sense of community", and such writing, she says, "aims to give lesbian identity a coherence and legitimacy that can make both individual and social action possible" (p278). What it aims to do and what it achieves, of course, may not be the same thing. In Chapter Two I discussed how a reliance on 'sameness' as a basis of identity can lead to the stifling of individual subjectivities, and how these very texts encouraged the idealisation of a 'correct' path through life.

The ideal of 'political correctness', adopted by some lesbians with much zeal, has extended at some times to dress and hair-dressing. Alisa Solomon (1993) gives an explanation for why being able to identify a dyke may

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<sup>51</sup> King was referring to the naturalising of lesbianism as a kind of touchstone of feminist purity in the United States in the 1970s. It was popularised by means of such phrases as "Feminism is the theory and lesbianism is the practice", and such questions as "Is it possible to be a heterosexual feminist?"

become important to lesbians. She sees dress codes as counteracting invisibility, and markers of possible solidarity in an alternative society. She feels (p214) that "we make rules because we're trying to make our values concrete"; lesbians are trying "to build an alternative model of society, not one based on power".

Solomon treats the concept of power as self-evident, and consequently does not think it necessary to detail how a world that is not based on power could be achieved. She seems to be talking about power differences between individuals, but gives no indication how these could be eliminated or even lessened. Having claimed that making rules is how lesbians make the political personal, she then argues against political correctness, claiming that it can be a cover for protectionism and denial of agency for lesbians by other lesbians. She is basing her argument specifically on the common request that lesbians attending lesbian events not wear deodorants or cosmetics to avoid creating problems for lesbians with allergies. She points out that fighting for better health care for the poor might be a more useful political act than trying to modify the behaviour of many lesbians to accommodate the few that have chronic health problems.

However, many lesbians would be very opposed to this analysis, which assumes that the health care system would actually be able to help those with chronic health problems.<sup>52</sup> Lesbians who see the health system as a part of the whole male-dominated, heterosexist, capitalist hegemony that suppresses them would not wish to put any energy into reforming it. It is

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<sup>52</sup> Not only lesbians; many radical feminists and other leftist and even otherwise conservative 'alternative health' supporters would disagree with this analysis. Opportunities for radical coalitions with groups on broad social issues such as health reforms have not often been taken up by New Zealand lesbian feminists as a group.

certainly hard to see how reforming the existing health system, in the United States or in New Zealand, would lead to a world that is not "based on power".

Phelan (1993), on the other hand, advocates that lesbians stop putting energy into justifying themselves and their choices, and into building "a world that does not require such justifications" (p777). This would involve analyzing power and justice issues, and looking for useful coalition partners to achieve the ends that will increase justice and spread power. She pleads with lesbians to stop silencing each other with claims of authority, and to pay attention to larger social issues.

#### 'Normalisation'

The background of widespread disapproval in New Zealand society that lesbians cannot help but be aware of has, in a sense, pushed them into 'normalising' their own choices. Jagose (1988a) points out that the stigmatised in a society do not have the power to reverse the label of 'deviance', but must move to re-create themselves and their communities as apparently 'normal'. Within the framework of their own lives, these lesbians take control of the meaning of 'normal'.

Taking this further, Martin (1993) quotes Zimmerman to the effect that some lesbian feminists have done this by using the power of naming to normalise lesbian (feminist) identity as loving rather than sexual, politically important rather than personally fulfilling. This may have been a resistance to a reduction by the dominant ideology of lesbianism to merely sexual desire, but the theory became involved in a denial of personal desire. It may be that the lack of agreement among lesbian feminists on the need for a

theory of sexual desire, which was epitomised by the Barnard debates and their outcome, or the earlier tendency to elide sexual with heterosexual, is implicated in that traditional Western Christian-based fear of the power of the erotic that had originally pathologised lesbians.<sup>53</sup>

The potential of lesbian theorising about sexuality to act as a critique on heterosexual 'norms' was severely limited by this minimising of the importance of the erotic in lesbians' lives. Martin (1993) points out that "rendering lesbianism natural, self-evident, original" had the potential to disrupt the 'normal, natural' continuities between "biological sex, gender identity, and sexuality" (p279). The coming-out narratives of the 1970s potentially provided a re-reading of the narratives of childhood of North American women, an intrusion into the flow of 'normal' experiences pointing to a well-adjusted heterosexual adult woman. The lack of application of this critique was due to the position of a 'naturalised' lesbianism as a privileged signifier, the seeing of it as 'outside' the 'system' of heterosexism, and therefore not related to it, not part of it, even as outside commentator on it (King 1986).

As I have indicated, it is a fantasy to imagine living completely outside the heterosexist system. Although there has been a small but dedicated number of separatist lesbians in New Zealand who have lived on 'women's land', the majority of lesbians have found their 'place' within the dominant ideologies of heterosexism and patriarchy, albeit from an 'excluded' position, but still as a vital part of the system. As I discussed above, Fuss (1991) points out how the marginal groups in a society, in a sense, act both as boundaries

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<sup>53</sup> See Alice (forthcoming 1996) for the effects of the debates held at Barnard in 1981 on lesbian theorising about sexual practice and desire.

and as projections of excess and of lack for those who imagine themselves as the centre or the 'norm'.

Acknowledgement of the doubleness of this position has come only lately. Alice (forthcoming 1996) reveals how cultural feminism tends not only to confine individuals, but also to "uncritically [continue] the discourse of male supremacy", by placing that discourse in opposition to what lesbian feminism is trying to achieve. Phelan repeats Lyotard's warning that "being in opposition is one of the modes of participation in the system" (p776). Instead of expending energy fighting the system, or pretending that it does not exist from what appears to be the outside, Phelan suggests that lesbian theorists might be better employed in deconstructing the system itself - examining the structures that try to put "sexual outlaws", to use Rubin's phrase, 'outside'. I would like to see this include more detailed analyses of sex roles or gender roles, of slippages that reveal that "the sex-gender system" (Rubin, 1984) is 'always already' implicated in its own subversion, or of any other critiques that can take advantage of lesbians placing of themselves as 'privileged outsiders'.<sup>54</sup>

Attempts by some lesbians to 'normalise' their status, to build communities which put the dominant ideology on the outside, have resulted in some interesting ironies. As Fuss (1991) points out, to be on the 'outside' of the dominant community opens one to the possibility of being part of the 'in-group' in a rebel culture. Practically, it means that lesbians (and gay men)

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<sup>54</sup> Derrida's phrase "always already" encapsulates the way that discourses are never stable, but are 'always already' deconstructing themselves. However, Fuss (1990) points out that this apparently totally fluid notion in fact hints at a naturalness, at an essential, irreducible core of truth in the concept it refers to - it is in the essential nature of discourses to be unstable.

can move to almost any large town or city, and find a subculture they can join.<sup>55</sup>

However, as Jagose points out, in many ways lesbians have moved to place themselves and their texts outside of critique by the dominant ideology. They have labelled texts "For lesbians only" in one attempt to do this, but more importantly lesbians have simply written as if their world was the world, thus attempting to make their texts impenetrable or uninteresting to others.<sup>56</sup> This reaction to the label of deviance can be seen in lesbian popular fiction as far back as the 1970s, according to Martin (1993). She reveals how the 1970s discourses of 'coming out', particularly as reinforced by the narratives available, appeared to reflect but actually created the reality of 'lesbian identity' as natural, and heterosexuality as deviant. It can be seen even more clearly in the newsletters that I have read.

I have already mentioned the possible implication of some anti-sex positions in lesbian feminism in the anti-eroticism of Western Christianity. It is not a coincidence that there is a badge available which proclaims the wearer to be a "Born-again Lesbian". A desire to build communities that reflected a need to identify each other and feel safe from the dominant ideology's disapproval, which has sometimes been so strong as to compromise their safety, has led some lesbians to naturalise the sexual desire of women for

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<sup>55</sup> Discussing this with a heterosexual man friend, he has found this also to be the case with the 'alternative music' scene. Composed of rebels, imaged as being the very antithesis of respectability, the people who make up this subculture have welcomed him in cities all over the world.

<sup>56</sup> For example, I have seen my son-in-law pick up a copy of the lesbian comic book *More Dykes to Watch Out For*, look at a few pages, shake his head in bewilderment, and put it down again. The stock characters in the text, which most lesbians would 'recognise' instantly, were meaningless to him.



women, and this has led to bounded communities, which have acted as microcosms of the greater community. As the wider community has pushed lesbians to the boundaries, so a strand of lesbian feminism has pushed other lesbians to the edges of their definitions of 'lesbian'.

"The 'price' of identity"<sup>57</sup>

These lesbian communities, grounded in a consciously feminist identity, formed in direct opposition to the dominant ideology, have found it difficult to incorporate or even to acknowledge difference. Cohen (1991) suggests that the 'price' of boasting an identifiable identity may be high, in terms of the suppression of 'difference', both for the individual and for the community:

If identity presupposes the 'fixing' of difference (in the sense of both repairing it and pinning it down), then the fixation on identity reiterates a painful process that simultaneously excludes and exacerbates 'non-identity'" (p76).

This process has indeed been "painful". Firstly, individuals have felt they have had to choose between conflicting claims to the most important 'element' of their identity. This is particularly shown in the newsletters in the agony of some Maori lesbians, but also for women who have felt isolated from other lesbians by claims that they have access to 'heterosexual privilege'. It has also hurt the communities, who have sacrificed individuals for what seems, now, to have been a futile search for homogeneity.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> This phrase appears in Cohen (1991). He credits it to Fuss (1990).

<sup>58</sup> Within the same week recently, one lesbian told me how hurt she had been by the rejection of some lesbians because she had a professional career, and was thus the recipient of 'heterosexual privilege'. In another conversation, I was told it was a mark of snobbery that most lesbians who get jobs at the University don't bother with 'the community' any more.

### Suppression of difference

Using the tool of consciousness-raising groups, the early lesbian-feminist movement both explored and imposed an "homogenising" of "experiential differences" (Alice, forthcoming 1996). Little history has been written of middle-class lesbian life in New Zealand prior to the 1970s, but Faderman (1991) claims, for the United States, that the butch-femme roles were generally shunned as "a manifestation of working-class lesbianism" (p175). Butch-femme couples draw attention to themselves far more than two women wearing clothes accepted as 'feminine'. This abjuring by middle-class lesbians of what is basically a question of style was carried on into early lesbian-feminist theorising, and is still a 'hot topic' for discussion among lesbians in New Zealand. Many, especially some lesbian feminists, claim to find it repellent, a hangover from old sex-role identifications that have been swept away, while a few savour the air of rebellion that daring to stand out carries with it.

In a community which subscribes to the butch-femme aesthetic, difference is where passion resides; the community actually depends on it.<sup>59</sup>

Feinberg's narrator (1993) relates her horror at the realisation that two butches were in a relationship with each other; she felt as if she understood the actual physical reaction that some heterosexual people have towards lesbians. While I certainly would not claim that difference is always a necessary condition of sexual attraction, for some people it may be crucial. Unfortunately, the some lesbian-feminist developed a view of life which supposed that difference, whether sexual, racial or class, would not only contain the seeds of a power imbalance, it would always mean that that

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<sup>59</sup> There is ample evidence of this in Nestle's memoir/story collection *A Restricted Country*, and in the collection she has edited *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*.

imbalance would be pathologically enacted. This kind of simplistic thinking is the result of the naturalising of lesbian identity, and the consequent resistance of lesbian feminist theory to examining its own identity politics through the 1970s and 1980s.

Lesbian feminists who support the concept of identity politics have consistently excluded from their communities the "feminist sexual radicals" (Rubin, 1984), sadomasochists, or even closeted women and bisexuals in an attempt to maintain homogeneity.<sup>60</sup> In contrast, Cohen (1991) sees that within the larger gay movement in recent years, a clear oppositional stance has emerged between those who wish to base their 'identity' on identifying with the larger community, and those who wish to base their 'identity' on differing from that community. Those who wish lesbians and gay men to be accepted as 'gaily normal' base their arguments on their 'identity' as citizens, and will tend to distance themselves from "sexual outlaws", such as paedophiles, bondage fetishists, leathermen or drag queens. On the other hand, those who wish to emphasise their 'difference' from society at large will rigorously reject those who wish to 'have it both ways', such as bisexuals, and those who are closeted. If difference were not seen as the outside or the opposite of identity, it should be possible to claim for all groups outside the dominant ideology that it is our identity that makes us different, that our difference is our identity and our identity is our difference (Alice forthcoming 1996).

There have been attempts by gay theorists to use the model of ethnicity as a model for gay identity. However, most models of ethnicity tend to rely on essential 'differences' between 'white' races and all others; correspondingly,

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<sup>60</sup> See my comments on Moraga and Hollibaugh in Chapter 2.

claims Cohen (1991), they tend to elide differences between 'non-white' races in favour of an analysis that concentrates on Afro-American identity.<sup>61</sup> Eliding differences between the different groups of people who might form a gay identity base, notably lesbians and gay men, but also sexual outlaw groups, is anathema to those who form those groups. The "price" for them of claiming a gay identity would be seen as too great. From this example the difficulties for even quite specific groups who might come under the umbrella of 'queer' or 'gay' can be extrapolated. Cohen (1991) avers that "'identity politics' has great difficulty in affirming difference(s)" (p74), and I would concur, and add that radical deconstruction of 'identity' and 'politics', of the kind I have undertaken in this thesis, can be only the beginning of valuing and encouraging the expression of difference in lesbian communities, and perhaps of a new basis for an identity politics without a fixed identity.

Attempts to take account of difference in communities founded on essentialist lesbian feminist theories about identity have tended to see an individual as a 'bundle of identities', all of which are hierarchised. Thus 'difference', rather than having value as being synonymous with identity, is allotted a value which depends on an arcane system of privilege. This system of 'privilege' in many ways functions as a reverse of the 'privilege' that can be observed in the dominant culture – as Martin (1993) points out, even in a "bounded community", lesbians are not immune to the ideology of the dominant society as regards the hegemonies of difference. While some lesbian feminists may appear to hold that difference must be minimised for

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<sup>61</sup> If this is a problem with the United States model, then does the same elision tend to favour Maori identity in New Zealand? Jagose (1988b) certainly thinks so, but others disagree. Her argument tends to exclude any recognition of indigenous viewpoints, and uncritically favours diasporic and allegedly 'postcolonial' thinking.

communities to function, identities based in difference are clearly crucial for the operation of those communities. A community of identical individuals would not hold anyone's interest or loyalty for long.

So how does lesbian feminism deal with the inevitable differences in its 'politically correct' ranks? Martin (1993) claims that the hegemony of assertions of lesbian identity over all other claimants to identity has made difference "a primarily psychological problem" (p275) – that is, a personal one for the individual. However, by asserting that 'the personal is the political', lesbian feminism has made it not only a psychological problem, but one which can be solved by the individual's and the community's adherence to the 'correct' political stance.

The next chapter will look at the workings of this in New Zealand in more detail. However, an example may serve to illustrate this here. Many lesbians who have formerly been addicted to drugs or alcohol are now 'in recovery'. This is a personal state, clearly, and part of an individual's identity, but it has a social outcome which can become a political stand for a community. There was a strong move in the 1980s to ban alcohol at lesbian functions in some New Zealand cities, to aid the recovery of individuals from addiction. Thus the community was exhorted to sacrifice the social pleasures of drinking alcohol in order to support a few individual members. However, the hegemonic nature of lesbian feminism quickly made drinking alcohol *per se* an anti-social habit for some lesbians. Those who enjoyed alcohol even moderately were sometimes made social pariahs, as the political analysis belatedly widened to include the capitalist, male-dominated business of alcohol production and marketing. This is, in part, the denial of agency and over-protectionism that Solomon (1973) refers to. But it is also an example

of how the fear of difference may drive lesbian analysis, rather than the acceptance and valuing of experience that both expresses and creates varieties of difference.

One of the most challenging problems for lesbian feminism in the 1990s and into the next century will be the accommodating of the analysis and experience of young women. Solomon (1993) has commented that lesbians have sometimes conflated important political insights with style rules, in an attempt to define what their community will stand for. Conflict has occurred when younger lesbians have espoused styles of clothing, hairdressing and makeup that 1970s lesbian feminists had rejected as heterosexist. Further theorising about identity politics, with a commitment to focusing on political coalition-building, may help to disentangle the strands of what are important political ideas for lesbians as feminists from what are merely stylistic conventions.

The problem for lesbian feminism in acknowledging the crucial part that difference plays in community is acknowledged by Jagose (1988a) when she writes "Like Janus, the lesbian community has two faces: the external egalitarian face and the internal differentiated face" (p182). She is explaining that, although lesbian feminism publicly held homogeneity as a virtue, it privately acknowledged difference within its ranks. This may be so, but the acknowledgement would generally be accompanied by an immediate hierarchising of that difference. Jagose slips into banality when she lumps together "white, middle-class lesbians" as oppressors. This kind of analysis is as "inadequate" and "impoverishing" (p183) as is the "ignoring or marginalising such factors as race and class" that she deplores.

The concept of the external and internal faces of community parallels the two commonly understood faces of the concept of identity that I began my discussion of identity with: the unique individual, and the links to others. There is always a delicate balance in process for an individual to 'place' him or herself at any time. Cohen (1991) comments, for instance, that although he does feel some sense of community with other "intellectual dykes and faggots", his "visceral response" tells him "that 'I' have no idea 'who "we" are'" (p72).

If difference were understood to be crucial to identity, rather than something that has to overcome for identity to work 'properly', the fragmentation effects that have seen homogeneity valued by some lesbian feminists might disappear, or at least be less acute. New ways of understanding community, which do not attempt to suppress difference in the way that fringe religious groups suppress difference, could lead to strengthened communities of lesbians. They might even lead to a growth of affinity-based politics, if Alice's notion of 'difference' as 'identity' were taken further. Jagose sees that United States lesbian writers have recently moved from a "literary separatism" which allowed them to "articulate a basic sexual identity" to "a more complex discussion of difference occurring within the lesbian identity" (1988a, p183). Perhaps this is a sign that theorising about identity is beginning to affect the way that even lesbians who have based their thinking in essentialist notions see themselves and their communities.

#### Ineffectiveness of an inturned community

It is essential that this theorising happens within lesbian feminist communities. The new queer theorists are questioning the basic concepts of

feminism – including even what the subject of feminism is. Alice and others are calling for a consideration of the basic instability of concepts like 'gender', so that feminist politics may become less concerned with "defending the agenda of fixed identity positions" (Alice forthcoming 1996), and devise other strategies for change.

A community that professes to be 'outside' the power relations of its wider social context immediately cuts itself off from the benefits as well as the drawbacks of those power relations. Lisa Hall (1993) reflects on the way the fear of power has affected some lesbian communities, citing it as one of the reasons why lesbians have no 'voice'. She sees lesbians as needing to rid themselves of notions of 'purity' as a necessary precursor to action. As I have already pointed out, the notion of 'privilege' in some lesbian theorising is usually a simple reversal of the power relations in the wider community. It is a moralistic and judgemental notion that only inhibits useful exchange with people who do not accept its precepts (see also Jones and Guy 1992).

A rigid idea of identity will pin lesbians to the network of power relations in a particular way, unless they interrogate the assumptions placed on them (Phelan 1993) – including the hegemony of heterosexuality as revealed by the question "Can you be heterosexual and a feminist?" Heterosexual identity, of course, is no more natural than lesbian identity is. Phelan suggests asking more historically situated questions, concerning how it might be to claim a particular identity at a particular time.

A community which theorises itself ahistorically and bases its theories on an essential identity, as many lesbian feminist communities have done, runs



the risk of political impotence<sup>62</sup>. Cohen (1991) states succinctly that

...the problem with 'movements' based on 'identity' is that by seeking change on the basis of a concept that is itself unchanging, they will almost inevitably and painfully contradict themselves (p88).

While internal contradictions are not in themselves deleterious, as they foster debate, change and growth in a community, the community must provide for either their resolution or accommodation for political action to occur. Phelan states quite categorically that the effect of the literal adoption of the slogan "The personal is the political" and the hegemonic nature of the feminist hierarchy of 'privilege' has been to turn lesbian communities inward, and to encourage the futility of self-imposed exile from political power bases. As will be seen in the following chapters, these effects are very evident in the newsletters that have circulated in the New Zealand lesbian communities.

#### Useful community building

I have shown that identity, as it is generally understood and used in the phrase "identity politics", is not in fact the stable, dependable basis for action that many lesbian feminists believe it to be. Phelan's view is that we should use identities strategically, 'as if' they were stable, being fully aware they are contingent and useful, not essentially true. However, Fuss (1990, p104) claims that pretending that the subject is stable, what she calls creating "fictions of identity", negates the unique creative power of

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<sup>62</sup> Many lesbians believe that lesbians, meaning women who chose not to have intimate relationships with men, have always existed, in opposition to the patriarchal order in which they have found themselves. I would not deny that some women have always sought sexual relationships with other women, and I find Faderman's (1981) notion of Romantic Friendship rather lacking in appreciation of passion and eroticism (see also Phelan 1989). However, I think this is the first time in the West for many centuries that most women have the possibility of economic freedom, which translates into freedom not to have to marry or form liaisons with men.

the Unconscious, by attempting to establish it as completed. "Fictions of identity", although appearing stable, are not a secure foundation for political theorising, let alone action. Instead, Fuss suggests that identity could more usefully be emphasised as "unstable and potentially disruptive", because this would "militat[e] against the tendency to erase differences and inconsistencies in the production of stable political subjects" (104). This would not only allow for difference to be acknowledged, it would build the validation of difference into the process of political theorising and action. Much political rhetoric is based on military models; the concept of a united front has been as intrinsic to planning for political action as for a military campaign. The idea of incorporating and emphasising difference in political alliances is intriguing and attractive.

This brings me to the point that theorising about the nature of identity and politics, gender and boundaries is not political action in itself. Political action relies on active participation by women and men, and as Cohen (1991) emphasises, the basis for political action is the body, "not as the site of (self)-differentiation but as the medium for creating transpersonal contiguities" (84-5). Maintaining essentialist notions about female and male bodies, and tying these notions to identity, means taking an ahistorical stance to theorising around identity. By doing this, some lesbian feminists could be cutting themselves off from some contiguities which could prove fruitful for their own community, and for the larger society in which, like it or not, they must live. Lesbian-feminist theorists who are uncomfortable with body-talk, who especially want to abjure the sexual expression of their bodies, are cutting themselves off from some possibilities for political usefulness, an action that could lead to political sterility or even impotence (Cohen 1990).

Contiguities, contingencies, coalitions. All of these words signify movement, shifting, touching, change. Phelan (1993) takes an view of political actions that is mercurial, envisaging

...coalitions that are based not on stable identities but on the recognition that some social signifiers presently embody and transmit relations of oppression. (p782).

She points out that these signifiers may mean different things at different times in a life, without losing significance for the whole of that life:

I may insist on my lesbian identity not because I believe myself to be 'really' lesbian, but because my relationship to that category (whatever that relationship may be) importantly structures my life (p782).

This puts emphasis on one's relationship to one's identity firmly on 'becoming', and emphasises the continuing act of self-creation. It leaves open the question of the nature of the relationship between the individual and the category, which will be even more unstable than the self and the category each are. It may often, if not always, be a resisting relationship, especially when the category 'lesbian' becomes entangled with a struggle to "police the boundaries" of who or what is lesbian and who or what is not.

It is from the margins of lesbian feminism, from lesbians of colour and the developing world, that challenges to narrowly-based identity politics are being made. Since the publication of the classic texts *This Bridge Called my Back* (1981) and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), 'white' lesbian feminists have been offered the information that the suppression of difference may not lead to a stronger community. They have been slow to acknowledge it.<sup>63</sup> Of all the white lesbian writers published since the early 1980s, it is only the names of Minnie Bruce Pratt and Mab Sagrest that are

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<sup>63</sup> Recently, theorists have increasingly begun to incorporate a range of 'third world' and 'indigenous' theorists, including Sandoval, Mohanty, Anzaldúa, Tuhiwai-Smith, Pere, Te Awakotuku and others.

mentioned by any of the theorists I have read as celebrating difference in their own work. Both Martin (1993) and Cohen (1991) see in Pratt's writing indications that the writer's lesbianism, although still central, is no longer "an identity with predictable contents...a total political and self-identification" (Martin 1993, p289). Martin goes on:

It remains a position from which to speak, to organise, to act politically, but it ceases to be the exclusive and continuous ground of identity or politics. Indeed, it works to unsettle rather than to consolidate the boundaries around identity, not to open them altogether but to open them to the fluidities and heterogeneities that make the renegotiation possible (p289).

Cohen (1991) also quotes from an essay by Martin and Mohanty on the same text by Pratt, to the effect that Pratt's writing

calls into question the notion of a coherent, historically continuous stable identity, and works to expose the political stakes concealed in such equations (86).

Segrest is named by Martin as another white Southern United States lesbian writer whose ideas about identity have been formed in relation to anti-racist work and relationships with women who were 'different', racially and in terms of class, from Segrest and Pratt themselves.

All discourses have their limits, and even the most influential are subjects of their time and cultural location. Phelan sees identity theories formed from poststructural and postmodern perspectives as more useful for lesbian political processes than identity politics have been, because they focus on differences, gaps and shifts between women. The use of the word "lesbian" may provide a basis for recognition, but no longer pretends to 'guarantee' it. As less structured notions allow for interaction with others, they should be more potent and effective politically. She points out that their greatest strength may be exactly their lack of stability: "as power is diffuse, resistance must be as well" (767).

## Summary

I began my discussion of identity politics in Chapter Two with the Combahee River Collective's 1974 statement. Phelan places their statement as an example of a local politics that engages at a local level, in terms of a metanarrative that does not dehistoricise identity. That may be a fair assessment of the statement as it originally stood, but unfortunately identity politics quickly moved from being a tool for critique to operating as a metanarrative in the marginalised communities of late capitalist democracies, in which concepts were often allowed to stand for ideas that became fixed and hegemonic.

When I began this study, I was not sure whether the experience of lesbian feminism in New Zealand would be similar to that in the United States, Australia or Britain. My reading has confirmed that there were similarities in the way that lesbian feminism developed in all Western countries, and that New Zealand followed some developments in the United States quite closely. However, I also I think that, because of New Zealand's isolation and small population, the hegemonic effects of cultural feminist strictures have been more deeply felt by some lesbians. Fuss wrote in 1990:

"What is missing in many of the treatises on lesbian identity is a recognition of the precarious status of identity and a full awareness of the complicated process of identity formation, both psychical and social" (p100).

It is exactly that recognition and awareness that I have found most lacking in the newsletters that were to act, in some senses, as arbiters of lesbian feminism in New Zealand for nearly twenty years.

Alice (forthcoming 1996) states that since the Barnard debates, there has been "heterogeneity within lesbian theory" around what constitutes sexual politics. However, this is not evident in the largely atheoretical world of

the newsletters. They are mostly unremittingly lesbian-feminist, but betray, ironically, their alignment with "the straight mind",<sup>64</sup> which, as Wittig suggests, has not shown itself very interested in critiques of feminism. In the following three chapters I will examine in detail how various issues and ideas were presented and debated in the newsletters *Circle* and *LIP* from 1973 to 1992. In Chapter Four I will look at the presentation of notions about identity and community in the light of the theoretical discussion in the last two chapters. I will then move on to look at how some personal issues were politicised, and, in Chapter Six, how some political issues were personalised for newsletter readers.

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<sup>64</sup> The title of Wittig's 1980 article in *Feminist Issues*. Wittig was referring to the ideological dominance of heterosexism. My point is that by refusing to become involved with critiques of the basis of lesbian identity politics, and ignoring the weaknesses of essentialist lesbian feminist thinking, led some lesbian feminists to actually adopt a hegemonic position of ideological dominance.

## Chapter Four:

### Issues of identity in the newsletters

#### Introduction

In Chapter Two I cited Bidy Martin's (1993) comment that it is a privilege to be able to question the existence of lesbian identity. It is a mark of maturity in lesbian communities to be able to question boundaries and limits. This can be done only by those who do not need them, who do not feel threatened by invisibility by challenges to them. I commented there that the New Zealand lesbian newsletters reflect a constant tension around concepts of visibility and image, while issues of identity have been less open to challenge in their pages.

In this chapter I will expand on this statement. I will show how contributors to the lesbian newsletters were constantly concerned with the limits and boundaries of the definition of a 'real' lesbian, while often remaining aloof from, or presenting naive answers to, the everyday issues confronting lesbians. Following on the discussion in the last two chapters, I will also explore the essentialist bases of 'identity' that newsletter contributors accepted unquestioningly long after feminist theory was exploring discourse analysis, psychoanalytic theory and deconstruction.

### The bases of lesbian identity in the newsletters

In all the foregoing discussion about lesbian identity, I have neither asked nor answered the question "What is a lesbian?" At its most simple, a lesbian is a woman who likes to have sex with women. This particular expression of sexual desire by gendered subjects in a patriarchal culture will have political effects, as Fuss (1990) notes, whether we like it or not. Each individual must continually negotiate the intersections of personal desire and political effect as part of the ongoing process of self-creation that is identity. For some lesbians, the political impact of their sexual desire may appear very unimportant through most of their lives; for others, it may assume an importance which renders the sexual dimension of their identity as lesbians as almost irrelevant.

To illustrate this, it is useful to start with what can be found in the newsletters in answer to the question "What is a lesbian?". In *Circle 35* (1980) we have what approaches a classic lesbian-feminist definition:

I don't mean someone who has sex with another woman. I mean someone who gives her time, strength, energy, life (emotional, sexual, mental, physical, spiritual), all these things to herself and to other women (and not to men). To me most feminism is empty, meaningless, boring, academic wanking when it's by itself, but I've (usually) felt that, when meeting ideas and women that are honest, and valid, and meaningful to me - essentially Lesbian" (p2).

For this writer, lesbianism is natural and right, and the only women who may call themselves 'lesbians' are those who are "honest" and "valid" and "meaningful". Expressions of sexuality are not only de-emphasised, they become completely irrelevant and even misleading.

Out of this narrow vision of what a lesbian is comes an equally limited idea of the responsibilities of a lesbian feminist to her community. In *Circle 34* are printed responses to a questionnaire about being a lesbian. A typical



answer to the question "What is the most important thing about being a lesbian?" is:

It's the knowing that we are right, the celebration of our lesbian selves, the genuine friendship, the striving for honesty, the recognising of what we cannot do yet and our attempts to change our behaviour so that it is not oppressive or offensive to other lesbians (p47).

While there is much that is positive in this passage, the linking of "knowing that we are right" with the words "genuine" and "honesty" in my view point toward a closed community, a community with barriers. The responsibility to "change...behaviour" will be the subject of much of Chapter Five. However, it interesting to note here that the expressed commitment to community building seems to return lesbian feminists to traditional female roles in the family: to continually adapt oneself to meet the needs of various other family members.

In the early seventies, lesbians writing in the newsletters described 'society' as a structuring force that limited the freedom of individuals to 'be themselves'. Thus, from *Circle 5* (1974), a naive but heartfelt judgment on how society prevents us from knowing our true selves:

...it's [sic] perpetuation of male and female sexual classification...the lack of education and freedom for young people to explore, without schitzophrenia [sic], their sexuality, and...the subtle propaganda by which the mass media sees the institution of marriage, as the ticket to the only secure and socially climactic lifestyle (pp24-25).

From another contributor in the same *Circle* comes a prose poem on freedom, which includes the following:

Until the time when all people have become resolved that true expression is spontaneous, not conditioned, we will continue to fight (p3).

Lesbians are seen here as freedom fighters, as the advance guard in the social revolution. Society is positioned as the enemy, with its dictates and strictures; the weapon is education; the goal is 'spontaneity'; the reward

will be 'real' expression and honesty.

New Zealand lesbians did not develop this idea in isolation. *Circle 10*, also in 1974, quotes an excerpt from *Lesbian/Woman* by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, entitled "Butch-femme": "The roles men and women (or butch and femme) play in our country are only acting, not honest and equal relationships between two human beings." Here again, Martin and Lyon consider that 'real' women will emerge when there is no longer a need for 'pretence'. They see the adoption of butch or femme roles as revealing doubts about lesbians' "true identity as women". They suggest that role-playing will be relinquished as lesbians "become older, wiser and more sure of their identity as people" (22). While this does allow that identity may develop, it also prescribes how this will happen. It assumes a natural, essential 'womanliness' that will tend to emerge for all lesbians. Once again, the differences among and between individuals, this time in their socio-sexual behaviour, is glossed over, and even vilified.

*Circles 9 and 10* (1974) contain reports of lectures by a lesbian psychologist visiting from Sydney. These are comprehensive, covering contemporary theories of socialisation, role models and deviance, and how lesbians can, and perhaps, should, develop an identity that resists society's expectations. She uses lesbians who 'stood alone', such as Violette le Duc, to strengthen her case, and quotes Simone de Beauvoir as saying: "In order to understand the world and find myself, I had to save myself from them [ie society]". These lectures are among the more academic of the contributions in any of the lesbian newsletters. They place attempts to account for lesbian identity firmly within a structuralist analysis.

An article in *Circle 10* (1974) called "The Label" illustrates Jagose's point (1988a) that lesbians try to control the meaning of 'normal' by placing lesbianism at the centre of 'normality'. The writer takes a social constructionist view of identity:

Homosexuals are made, not born....There is very little evidence that homosexual traits are inherited. There are many factors that contribute to the development of homosexual tendencies and these are in the person's environment....We who are homosexuals are not queers" (p20).

Again, while development is allowed for, there is the implication that the subject is more or less powerless against 'society', and can only rail against the limitations placed on her. However, this is directly contradicted by the view that being a lesbian is more 'natural', and therefore 'freer', than being a heterosexual woman. This is a clear illustration of the inevitable slippage between constructionist and essentialist viewpoints (Fuss, 1990), and their ultimate dependence on and displacement by, each other.

The 'naturalness' of lesbianism, as opposed to the supposed 'artifice' of heterosexuality, continued to be a strong theme into the 1990s. In *Circle 27* (1977) is a contribution from a woman who always felt she wasn't a "REAL lesbian" (p47, original emphasis), because she wasn't especially big or strong. However, becoming a member of a consciousness-raising group has given her new confidence. She now sees that "Lesbianism is the only way not to be in a role" (p49). This is further romanticised with an appeal to freedom: "Being a lesbian means keeping your own power and not giving it away (as hetero. women have to)" (p49). The group had spent some time looking for 'hints' that they had always been lesbians: "...an important connection...was relating Lesbianism to our natural childhood sexual experiences with other girls - it's so natural" (p49). She, approvingly,

quotes another group member as explaining that "Feminism is the ideology and lesbianism is the emotion" (p49).

This statement continues the age-old split between emotion and reason which reinforces traditional male-female modes of behaviour, putting lesbians in the 'womanly' or 'emotional' mode. More importantly, it begs the question of what emotion heterosexual feminists would ever be allowed by lesbians. This reinforces my view, expressed in Chapter Two, that the lesbians who contributed to the newsletters expressed a hegemonic position not only among lesbians, but within feminism. They saw themselves as the true feminists, and the most 'natural', least 'colonised' by men, of all women.

#### The influence of lesbian feminism in *Circle*

The 'normalising' of the lesbian feminist lifestyle in the texts it produces (Jagose 1988a) mirrored the growing development of 'political correctness' in the newsletters. The rise of this hegemonic view of lesbian feminism can be seen quite clearly in a series of articles in *Circle 30*. Quite understandably congratulating themselves on their thirtieth issue, the Collective took the opportunity to recount some of the "herstory of the magazine", and to "talk about themselves as lesbians". As this was just after lesbians withdrew their support from the feminist magazine *Broadsheet*, there is clearly a strong desire to create a viable vehicle for lesbian feminist views.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, for the rest of its history, *Circle* continued to reproduce discussions among collective members and other theoretical articles, many of which were repetitive, to explicate what they saw as the tenets of lesbian feminist theory.

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<sup>65</sup> Chapter Six details this event as it was reported in the newsletters.

*Circle*, according to the short "herstory" in *Circle 30*, began as a result of the formation of Sisters for Homophile Equality in 1973. This organisation had already grown out of the new Gay Liberation Movement, because of dissatisfaction with "what was basically a male movement" (p33). Two members who had travelled overseas spurred to local women to "achieve political aims around the lesbian issue" (p33). These 'gay' women combined with a few who were active in Women's Liberation to try and make connections for themselves between feminism and their sexual lives.

Inside the cover of the first issue of *Circle*, in December 1973, was a statement of intent, that included the following:

It is our intention to represent all age groups and social levels, as well as all attitudes and needs. We do not intend to become an intellectual, middle-class movement or magazine, representing the interests of a small minority and able to be understood only by those with university degrees (p34).

It was a plan doomed to failure. It is difficult for a magazine based on voluntary labour and the political commitment of a few not to become focused on the "attitudes and needs" of those few and their friends. Added to this mix was the tendency for sexual relationships to form, un-form and re-form among members of the collective and the limited numbers of lesbians with an interest in political matters. As *Circle 30* put it "...changing lover relationships in the group usually meant that while one woman stayed the other left and a new face appeared" (p37). A collective in Christchurch produced *Circle 5*, after complaints that the first few issues had been "sexist", and they, and a group in Auckland called the Gay Feminist Collective, continued to produce occasional issues.<sup>66</sup> However, *Circle* was to remain basically the production of a small group of Wellington

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<sup>66</sup> I discuss the 'sexism' of early *Circles* in Chapter Five.

lesbian-feminist women.

Putting out the magazine was, at the start, "very much a social occasion" (p34). There was no club at that time, and some women found the only gay meeting places in Wellington in the early 1970s to be male-dominated, violent, and fairly frightening.<sup>67</sup> The opening of Club 41 in 1974 removed the need for the group to fulfil this function, and meetings began to get more 'serious'. At this point "some women left the group because it wasn't a good time anymore" (37). The serious business of explaining and demonstrating a lesbian feminist view on life had begun in earnest.

As happened so often in lesbian feminist circles, it was the topic of men, ironically, that finally split the group. "[T]hose who saw men as 'people too'" (p37) were forced to leave, and "those who considered [men] to be responsible for the oppression of women" (p37) took over the running of the magazine: "Those of us who remained in the collective put women first and men overboard." It was a reference point outside the group, attitudes to men, that determined its future direction, but this does not seem to have been clear to the collective at the time.

Despite the apparent abjuring of men and male values, the questionnaire in *Circle 32* (1980) found it necessary to ask the question "What do you think men are?" The 21 answers (*Circle 34*) range from "boring" and "a write-off" to angry, violent reactions. *Circle 35* printed a discussion among the collective members called "What's feminism anyway?" All of the answers focus on their perception of men's role in the world, and see feminism as a

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<sup>67</sup> For example, the well-known Royal Oak Bistro, which had been a meeting place for queers of all kinds since at least the early 1960s: transsexuals, transvestites, gay men. Personal knowledge, see also Laurie (1985a).

reaction to all women being oppressed by all men. As an example:

The thought of being equal to men is revolting, I want no part of their world, I see absolutely no future in it, how can there be when it's based on power and greed....being a Lesbian-feminist means trying to live outside that system as much as much as possible and developing my personal and political life with other lesbians, and hopefully survive (p4).

For the *Circle* collective, living in opposition to the patriarchal, heterosexist 'norm' is the key to survival as lesbians.

It is not until *LIP 11* (1987) that the extent to which the lesbian feminists writing in the newsletters defined themselves in relation/opposition to men is openly acknowledged. An angry correspondent attended a dance with a friend who, although beginning to identify as lesbian, was still living with her husband. Her friend was loudly abused, and left distressed. She makes several excellent points concerning the need for lesbians to make the 'boundaries' of their communities permeable to women coming out - in other words, to welcome them. The reality is that it will be difficult for women, especially women who have been in heterosexual relationships or who have children, and who wish to live as lesbians, to make that transition. No amount of theorising about 'heterosexual privilege' will change their experience. She also points out that defining lesbians by their social or psychological distance from men "continues the focus on men that I came out to get away from" (p4).

#### Visibility, Image and Style

One of the ways a few lesbians rebel against patriarchal society is in the taking of alternative name(s) from those they were given at birth. This may be done legally, by deed poll, or informally.<sup>68</sup> In the newsletters there are

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<sup>68</sup> It is not illegal in New Zealand to use a name other than one's given name, as long as there is no intention to defraud in its use.

two contributions from women who have changed their names. In *Circle 38* (1981), a contributor feels the fact she has "a given name and a handed down one twice removes me from my own self-identification, the way I see myself and the decisions and choices I have made...for myself" (p52). This writer resisted using deed poll, partly because she objects to having to pay for it, and partly because using an 'unofficial' name leaves her outside the system. In fact, the system still considers her to exist with her birth name; in effect her identity is both within and without 'official' documents. Presumably she feels that by living this way she can lay complete claim to the part of her self that is 'unofficial'. A 1987 contributor to *LIP 12* objects to an earlier article where she was referred to as "used to be X".<sup>69</sup> She feels that

the name I was given by the patriarchy is not who I used to be but merely a label I used to use. I feel I am Z and that is who I have always been....With the verbal expression of Z I was able to open many closed and or suppressed parts of myself which my patriarchal label had repressed (p8, emphasis in original).

Clearly, she feels that her identity resides in, and is affected or even controlled by, words spoken aloud or written down.

### Lesbian Style

One of the most interesting aspects of lesbian identity discussed in the newsletters is the question of the 'correct' lesbian style. As an often beleaguered group in New Zealand society, some lesbians have developed an elaborate system of recognition for other lesbians. This might involve clothing, hairstyles, or, more subtly, a tell-tale intimacy that two women might be seen to display in public. If it involves clothing or hairstyles, it will not necessarily follow fashion. In fact it has been less likely to mirror

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<sup>69</sup> I have substituted X for her given name and Z for her taken name.



current fashion trends as time has gone on, and many lesbian feminists have tried to indicate more and more that they are not a part of conventional society.

One indicator of this attempted dissociation can be seen by looking at the graphics used in the newsletters. A cartoon advertisement for Club 41, a lesbian club in Wellington, is reproduced below as Figure Three. This advertisement ran for most of 1974. It is drawn in the style of romantic 'love comics'. All women are fashionably slender, dressed in the current fashion of miniskirts or flared trousers, and have fashionably long tresses or short styled hair. It is entitled "I couldn't cope in the straight world to save my life", and a caption on the final frame proclaims "Club 41 for all women". As we will see in Chapter Five, the boundaries of the lesbian community were not then as closed to bisexual women as they were to become.

A further indication of this acceptance by lesbians in the mid-1970s of themselves as marginalised, but pushing for acceptance, is the broadcast of a radio programme in 1974 by Peter Kingston. Entitled "Gay Ladies Coming out of Their Closets", the text of the broadcast was reproduced in the *New Zealand Listener* on 6 July 1974. It took the form of an interview with some lesbian activists, and a report of a visit to Club 41, where, Kingston reported, the women all looked quite 'normal': "There were none of the butch types that one associates with lesbianism" (p18). Although it comes across to us now as patronising, it was at least an attempt to present lesbians as normal at a time when they were widely looked on as deviant. The presence of a man in the lesbian club, which would be anathema now, was obviously countenanced as being necessary to foster an improved

public image.

However, there was a reaction to the radio broadcast in *Circle 9*. It is scornful, not only of Kingston and his patronising attitudes, but of the women who were "taken in" by him (p17). Here we can see, perhaps for the first time, a clear split between the lesbians who want to be accepted, who tend to use the word 'gay' to describe themselves and who include bisexual women into their community, and those who theorise their transgressive status, and perhaps want to foreground feminist issues. It is this group who have become the visible face of lesbianism in New Zealand.

The question of style became more central as the 1970s progressed. As feminist thinking became the driving engine behind the actions of the collectives that put out the newsletters, there is a corresponding move to reject images that are 'culturally feminine' in favour of those that reflect 'real women'. This is an

I couldn't cope in the straight world to save my life.

It was alright with just us girls but whenever there were boys around - I froze.

and when it came to dancing, oh I'd rather have died than join in.

I decided to ask my flakey mate Joe.

Deep down I knew what the problem really was, I much preferred the company of gay women.

There's no need to worry about that - the secret of a beautiful evening is CLUB 41! Come I'll take you...

LATER..

It's as if I've taken off a mask I'm having such a wonderful time.

**CLUB 41**  
for all women.  
41 vivien st wellington.

Figure 3: Advertisement for Club 41, 1974 (*Circle 9*).

essentialising move, as detailed in Chapter Two. Examples of later graphics depicting 'true womanliness' are reproduced below as Figure Four. They have become detached from the 'fashionable': slim silhouettes are 'out', and rounded, lumpy, vaguely fertility-goddess shaped figures, stick drawings to illustrate political points, and reproduced symbols are 'in'. The women are often depicted in action, perhaps playing softball, where the earlier figures often passively posed or depicted enjoying sexual activities. Depictions of 'natural' women persist as the main themes of illustrations into the 1990s.

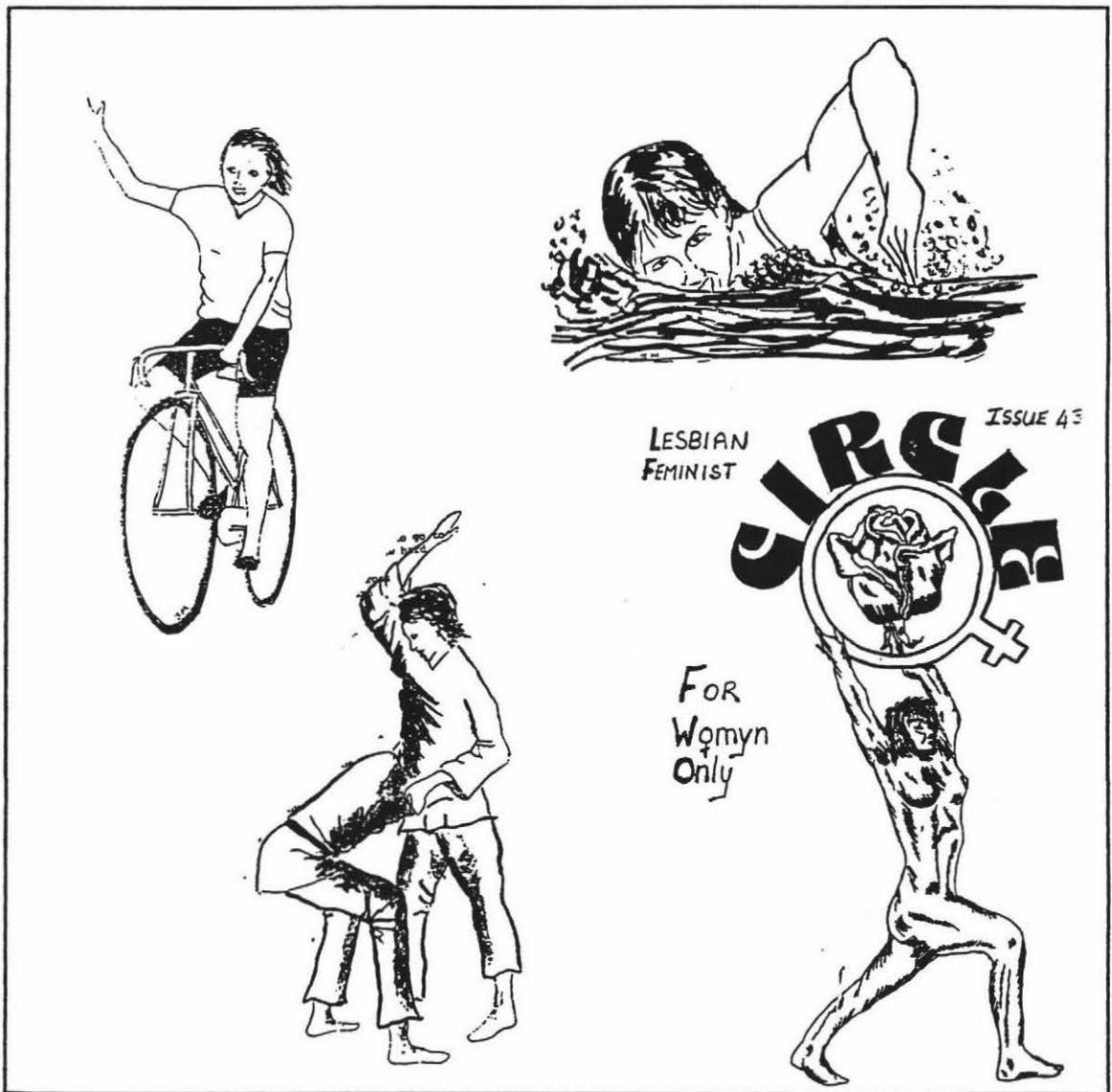


Figure 4: Various examples of art work from later *Circles*.

Another aspect of the importance of 'style' that I have already mentioned lies in the need lesbians express to recognise other lesbians. The newsletter contributors seem to feel that the lesbian feminist subculture world-wide is an international code to 'read' by all lesbian feminists. In *LIP* 9 (1986) a woman writes about an experience in New York, when she asked two women she spotted at a movie if they were lesbians. Although they denied it, she is convinced they were lying. She could read The Signs!

In the newsletters, lesbian style becomes more than a matter of personal taste. It becomes an indicator of personal commitment to political ends, an important signifier of lesbian pride in identity. A member of the Collective is reported in a group discussion in 1980 entitled "Survival":

I have got prejudices against women, even lesbians, who seem to retain a lot of their heterosexual privilege that goes with what I term as being heterosexually attractive...women who have perhaps cut their hair and wear no makeup but still dress on the border line and in dykey fashion - they look like dykes and can fit in with us, but they also look like straights and can fit in with them, and haven't really thrown their looks to the wind; they still consider it important to look right, and to look just casual enough to be able to fit into the pub, and just dressy enough so as to be able to fit into an office party....It's like a sellout, they use us [political dykes], but get a lot of support from society out there (*Circle* 34, p12).

The argument is that if you were a 'real lesbian' you would dress a certain way, so that lesbians could identify you and the 'straight' world would not assume you to fit in with their expectations. This, of course, ignores that fact that even politically active lesbians may be employed in positions in which they are expected to conform to a particular style of dress, or even wear a uniform. It also 'politicises', for very unclear ends, the very 'personal' matter of clothing style. It is unclear what political point is being made, or political advantage gained, beyond a dubiously useful visibility, by lesbians adopting a dress code.

For separatists, style becomes even more crucial; in fact it appears to be central to separatism. *LIP 7* (1986) includes an essay on separatism, entitled "Lesbian Separatism is vital to all lesbians", which was later expanded, with others, into the book *Dykes-Loving-Dykes*. Comments on what might be thought of as personal appearance choices by individuals include:

Are we going to see more and more lesbians looking straight, and getting privilege by wearing dresses...makeup...long hair...high heels...and all the other het paraphernalia that used to be recognised by many lesbians, as being bad for us?...Why are so many European-descent lesbians bleaching their hair, when blondness is a racist standard of looks?...The "fag-tag" hairstyle [is] short at the front and long at the back, so you can look straight but sort-of look like a Dyke (p32-3).

This is an attempt to convince lesbians that nothing in the wider society is good for them, that all conspires to 'feminise' lesbians, and thus render them invisible. Of course, "dyke style" will only work if 'straight' society recognises it as significant. Looking out of fashion, frumpy or sloppy will not, in itself, make lesbians more visible.

Lesbians' notions of how they appear to others sometimes create unintentionally humorous effects. *LIP 2* (1985) carries a report about a lesbian camping holiday, which seems to have been incredibly badly managed. The camp was rained out, because they didn't know to dig drains around their tents, and they had no hot food and no dry gear. The writer fantasises that, as women independent of know-it-all men, they may have looked "attractive" to the "straight women" at the camping ground (p35). It is more likely that they actually looked like a lot of wet, rather inept women.

### Privilege

The concept of privilege, with its attendant hierarchy as discussed in the previous chapter, is taken for granted throughout most of the newsletter

discussions about lesbians' relations with conventional society. One of the more bizarre applications occurs in *Circle 32*, in a discussion about Charlotte Bunch's visit to New Zealand to address the 1979 United Women's Convention. Far from being pleased that a lesbian had, at last, been invited to be a key speaker at a Convention, lesbians writing in *Circle* found fault with almost everything Bunch said and did. As a "professional travelling lesbian feminist speaker" (p20), they denied she could be radical, or could represent them. They felt she had power and acceptance only because they had given her their power, and she had misused it. The fact that she is respected by 'the establishment', in their view, disqualifies her from being a 'real' lesbian. There was only one letter in response to the anger of these self-styled "fem-les's", asking for further clarification of what they would class as 'radical'. This request does not seem to have been answered.

The hierarchised concept of privilege also limited discussion in the newsletters about class. An excellent example is an ongoing consciousness-raising discussion reported in *Circle 27* (1977). Although trying valiantly to come to terms with class issues in lesbian feminist terms, the participants are hampered by their limited understanding of identity, which they base entirely on a hierarchy of privilege. They found they could

make some generalisations about class, from [their] own experiences, e.g. if you are poor and working class not only do you suffer physical deprivation and all kinds of deprivations by not having things, but the personal things that happen in your family are worse as well....The 3 working class Lesbians had all suffered physical violence unlike the other Lesbians in the group (p51).

Working class people are also more honest and are better at budgeting, they claimed. The group seems to recognise, vaguely, that identity might actually be based in difference. But that difference is immediately hierarchised, so that the middle-class lesbians could not have been able to

express their pain, which, by definition, could never be as acute as that of their working-class sisters. Out of a simplified, fixed, essentialist view of identity emerges the negativity, puritanism, and moral superiority inherent in this type of consciousness raising. Its refusal to accept the life experiences of all group members as equally valid exemplifies the most negative aspects of this kind of lesbian feminist philosophy.

### Difference

This narrow vision about what identity might be led to a blindness of the realities of life for those lesbians who were visibly 'different'. It is not until the late 1980s that there is much serious discussion in the newsletters about race, disability or body size issues for lesbian feminists. Lesbians' claims to be in the vanguard of social reform, discussed earlier, recurred frequently throughout the twenty years of the newsletters. The evidence from their pages does not, however, support this claim. In later issues of *LIP*, the pain that the narrowness of the lesbian feminist vision has created for Maori women begins to become evident.

For example, in *LIP 13* (1987), a Maori lesbian who had been selected to go to a conference in Costa Rica as part of a Maori delegation writes of her confusion and distress. Just before the delegation was to leave, the heterosexual women in the delegation had announced on *Te Karere* that they would not travel with her, as she was known to be a lesbian.<sup>70</sup> They stated that "Lesbianism was white and not Maori and therefore could not be part of the united Kaupapa they wished to travel under". This article gives a tiny glimpse of homophobia toward Maori lesbians within Maori culture,

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<sup>70</sup> *Te Karere* is the national daily Maori news programme on New Zealand television

but there is no evidence that Pakeha lesbians had offered support to the Maori lesbian who had been so publicly discriminated against. Frustratingly, the promised Part Two of this article never eventuated.

These problems were further glimpsed in *LIP 24* (1991), where a Maori woman joined a discussion entitled "Lesbians discuss Heterosexual Visibility in the Arts". She expresses the opinion that, due to the fact that much Maori art is seen as having to have complementarity of the sexes,

...for female Maori artists to express themselves as separate from men then they're probably going to have to be lesbian, and since many Maori lesbians want the approval of their Maori male family and colleagues and wimin who support them, I think we might have to be separatist as well (p21).

However, this solution had already been rejected by the Maori Caucus at the Lesbian Workers in Refuge National Hui 1991. The report in *LIP 23* comments:

It was felt that for most Maori dykes - it is near impossible to separate our sexual identity from that of our cultural identity. That the survival of our people in the fight against racism will often take precedent over our sexuality. For us to survive with two identities intact (which we all attempt to do) - inevitably leaves us in positions of compromise. Falling short of becoming separatist - Maori dykes will always be in that position (p11).

However, in a speech to a Lesbian and Gay Conference in Wellington in 1985, a Maori lesbian states

Culturally, our Maori identity and our lesbian identity flow together. It is an ongoing task to establish our role within the whanau, the family, and the wider Maori and Pacific Island community. In every tribe there are different ways of seeing lesbianism and homosexuality (p8).

None of these impasses for Maori women who identify as feminists and lesbians could be lessened, much less resolved, by clinging to ideas about identity that are rigid, bounded, and the result of hierarchising differences. Notions of identity that actually flow from a basis of the



acknowledgement of difference, such as I outlined in Chapter Two, could validate individual experience. They might allow Pakeha lesbians to listen to, learn from and support the struggle of Maori lesbians, without attempting to relate all oppression to a single, root oppression of lesbians by society.

The use of the oppression of lesbians as a metanarrative for all oppressions sometimes led lesbians to deny that lesbians could oppress other lesbians. The next chapter will detail specific charges of racism which were made by Maori lesbians in Auckland against lesbian venues and Pakeha lesbian women, which were unable to be answered by an appeal to the existing lesbian feminist analysis in the newsletters.

#### The re-vision of Separatism

The importance of separatist doctrines as an important touchstone in the lesbian-feminist thinking of the newsletters has already been discussed. The basis of most separatist theorising lies in the extremes of essentialist thinking from the 1970s that underpinned such statements as "All men are mutants" and "All women are lesbians - some of them just don't know it yet". However, there has been a strong revival of separatism in the 1990s, evidenced in part by the publication of *Dykes-Loving-Dykes*. This is a separatism bordering on fanaticism, contrasted as it is by new theorising about identity that attempts to discuss ideas on the basis of their sometimes strategic usefulness to communities, rather than as fixed 'truths'. Separatist thinking appears to have lost some of the influence that it once exerted over lesbian feminism. Perhaps some lesbians no longer see themselves as fighters attacking 'the system' from outside, but see their identities as more processual, in less fixed positions, able to contribute and

benefit more broadly within society.

I began this chapter with a reading of the early *Circles* that revealed a view of lesbian identity which, while it was fixed in a structuralist way, did see lesbians as fighting and playing a part – albeit in opposition – to the social mores of the early 1970s. I have briefly traced the development of the lesbian feminist ideas of newsletter contributors, which were usually based on essentialist notions about maleness and femaleness. Beginning with a rejection of women who wished to retain some connections with men in their lives, such views slowly revealed a rejection of the mores of the wider society, and worked themselves through to the position which underpinned the later issues of *LIP* – an essentialism which saw men as dangerous mutants and glorified a separatist position. However, the small number of contributors to the later issues of *LIP* and its eventual demise can probably be attributed to the fact that many, perhaps even most, New Zealand lesbian feminists in the 1990s began rejecting rigid, essentialist bases for identity in favour of more open alliances. The next chapter will continue to examine the texts of the newsletters, looking at how the personal was politicised for the readers. Chapter Six will look at how political positions and alliances were dealt with in the newsletters.

## Chapter Five:

# Politicising the personal

### Introduction

As I discussed in Chapter Two, the overpowering weight allotted to the phrase "the personal is the political" has been discussed by Fuss (1990) and Phelan (1989, 1993), who both comment on the tendency among lesbian writers to treat the notion of 'the political' as transparent. This chapter will look in some detail at how the personal was politicised in the pages of the New Zealand lesbian newsletters. By this I mean I will be looking at how, in these newsletters, the phrase "the personal is the political" was taken to mean that lesbians needed to be constantly aware of the wider implications of their everyday actions. As I have described previously, it led to the development of lesbian identity politics, which was based in an undertheorised notion of identity. I will examine in what ways writers to the newsletters attempted to make events of lesbians' personal lives significant both for other lesbians, and for how lesbian communities saw themselves in society. As I have suggested throughout this thesis, lesbian identity politics narrowed rather than widened the world of those who took them literally.

This chapter will look at what information, advice or discussion the

newsletters offered lesbians on events and problems in their daily lives: dealings that lesbians had with heterosexual or bisexual women, issues of sexual expression and behaviour, monogamy and commitment, violence in relationships, and racism at social venues. It will look especially at how the newsletters' treatment of these issues was limited by an essentialist view of what a lesbian might be.

#### Relations with heterosexual women

The forming and maintaining of personal relationships was an area that created great confusion when 'political' elements were forced into consideration. Some newsletter articles imply that any relationship or friendship between a lesbian and another person must be relentlessly examined for signs of 'privilege', creeping heterosexuality, hidden sexism, or other elements of Political Unsoundness. This is the case whether the relationship is between two lesbians, between a lesbian and a heterosexual or bisexual woman, or between a lesbian and a gay or straight man. In each of these situations the 'power relations' between the people, their places on the 'privilege' hierarchy, differ, and cause different problems for lesbians.<sup>71</sup> As mentioned previously, various discussions reported in the newsletters on the questions of power imply that unequal power in relationships is always bad and must always be resisted, with the eventual aim of eliminating power imbalances for all interpersonal relationships.

Some relationships that lesbians became involved in were based on political

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<sup>71</sup> It is, of course, accepted wisdom within the lesbian feminism that informed the newsletters, that lesbians will always have less privilege than any of the other 'categories' of person they are in contact with, 'masculine' appearing lesbians less than lesbians who can easily 'pass', unemployed lesbians less than those in professional employment, and Maori lesbians less than Pakeha.

commonality of interest, such as with heterosexual feminists for the purposes of opposing government policy, or with gay men for the purposes of fighting for homosexual law reform, as I detail in Chapter Six. In these situations, evidence in the newsletters is that lesbians had to be especially vigilant – and often with good reason. Although, as stated previously, the lesbian newsletters sometimes give the impression that lesbians are anti-male, there is no doubt that there were sections of the wider community that did (and still do) fear and hate lesbians and feminists. Lesbians often had to work hard to maintain their own credibility and integrity at the same time as they were trying to forge political alliances. However, as indicated in Chapter Two, limiting the sharing of 'lesbian energy' only to other lesbians increases the danger of lesbian feminists forming introverted and politically ineffectual communities.

As I discussed in Chapter Four, early newsletters gloss over differences between lesbians, bisexual women, and heterosexual women. The word 'gay' was used in much the same way as 'queer' is now being used in general parlance – to indicate unconventionality in sexual tastes and behaviour, rather than homosexuality specifically. A contributor to *Circle 5* (1974) describes how the Gay Feminist Collective in Auckland believes that it is not true that "the old problems between gay and straight women still exist", because

[t]he majority of heterosexual feminists have learned how to deal effectively with the most dreadful of all accusations about the women's movements....Also...many heterosexual women have found the lesbian within themselves and developed their potential to relate bi-sexually to PEOPLE and not exclusively the male sex object (p5, emphasis in original).

This "ability to relate bi-sexually" is seen as an advantage. Clearly, bisexual women were welcomed in this community, and personal relationships with them were not seen as 'taking lesbian energy'. Similarly, *Circle 9*

(1974) reports that the new Women's Centre in Christchurch is the result of co-operation between SHE, Radical Feminists, University Feminists and NOW.<sup>72</sup> The report is positive, stating how easy it has been for these diverse groups to co-operate. It also insists that heterosexual feminists don't find the word Lesbian insulting.

This state of apparent tolerance did not continue. *Circle 24* (1976), advertising a Radical Feminist Caucus Camp, suggests that the lesbians attending go with the idea of educating the 'straight' women, and take books along to do this. A thought-provoking article follows, which includes an analysis of heterosexuality as an "instrument in the power relationship between the sexes" (10), along with information that there had been strife between lesbians and heterosexual women at a Radical Feminist Caucus earlier in that year. A report from the January 1977 Feminist Radical Caucus meeting in *Circle 25* indicates that the lesbians and heterosexual women at that event separated for workshops, but not for what were called 'support groups'.

Three years later, details of the events leading up to the split in the *Broadsheet* Collective, discussed in Chapter Six, are reported in *Circle 30* as connected with problems *Broadsheet* was experiencing in sharing its premises with the Women's Art Collective, a group of Lesbian artists. However, this was clearly the symptom of a much deeper rift. Some heterosexual members of the *Broadsheet* Collective denied that lesbianism was a political issue. They maintained it was only a Civil Rights issue, a

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<sup>72</sup> SHE: Sisters for Homophile Equality, an early lesbian organisation; Radical Feminists: probably a Marxist-based group; NOW: National Organisation of Women, a conservative middle-class, pakeha-dominated reform movement.

distinction that seems difficult to defend: what could be non-political about Civil Rights?

The Women's Art Collective is in itself interesting as an example of ways that political implications were integrated into personal goals. Participants, all working artists, report a range of views of the place of the political in their lives. "My radical lesbian politics and my creativity are the core of my life. They are based on my experience as a woman" (p82), says one. "I want to find my starting point now as a woman artist...I am not a tactical person, a strategist or a politician and find all these activities grating on my system" (p83) says another resentfully. Another feels bitter that the "oppressed" are "'taking it out on each other" (p83). None of the artists reported can understand why their presence was so threatening to the heterosexual members of *Broadsheet* that they were made scapegoats for the split in the Collective.

Two articles about the relationship of lesbians to the word 'women' reveals both the essentialist and constructionist underpinnings to their theorising. *Circle 20-22* (1975) reprints several pages of radical rhetoric from a United States group called CLIT (Collective Lesbian International Terror). Included is the view that

The danger of straight women is their disguise. they look like women. and sometimes remnants of the infant women they once were cut loose for a fleeting instance. but that passes...they are males in disguise. the only difference between straight women and drag faggots is that faggots are real men (p30 - punctuation as in original).

In this world view, the word 'woman' signifies that which is not male, an essential, elemental truth-state predating sexism. Lesbians are real women, and heterosexual mores have warped other women into imitations of men. This is particularly ironic, as the commonest accusation made against

lesbians is that they are 'trying to be men', a claim that is vigorously denied by virtually all lesbians – albeit for a variety of reasons.

On the other hand, the essay "Lesbian Separatism is Vital to all Lesbians" in *LIP 7* (1986) denies that lesbians are women, as 'women' were invented by men "to name females who are sexually, emotionally and economically allied to them" (33).<sup>73</sup> The writer sees the concept of 'woman' as a patriarchal creation, which they specifically reject. Beginning as a constructionist view, this slides into essentialism; she is presuming a femaleness that pre-existed before men created 'women', and which she claims lesbians represent. These two seemingly opposing positions on the meaning of 'woman' are, in fact, both based on an essentialist slippage about gender, that rests on the way each uses the word 'woman'.

Incidentally, this means of distancing lesbians from the norms of wider society was turned around in an interesting way by a correspondent to *Circle 34*. In a reply to an earlier questionnaire which had asked "What do you think men are?" she replied:

Men are very strange creations of heterosexual wimmin, of indeterminate purpose to them and of no purpose at all to me (p37).

No-one who answered the questionnaire thought men were of any use at all; most claimed they refused to even tolerate them in their lives.

### Sex Issues

The lack of politicising of sexual desire among newsletter contributors may, as I have suggested, be tied to a puritanism associated with the calvinist

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<sup>73</sup> This position echoes Monique Wittig, although this is not acknowledged in the text.



underpinning of New Zealand society. It is also related to lesbian feminism's wish to find a new basis for relationships. This was a process that can be traced through the newsletters, which sometimes led to non-productive dead-ends.

The cartoons in the earliest *Circles* were, as I discussed in Chapter Four, the subject of complaints from readers about sexism. They remind me of the

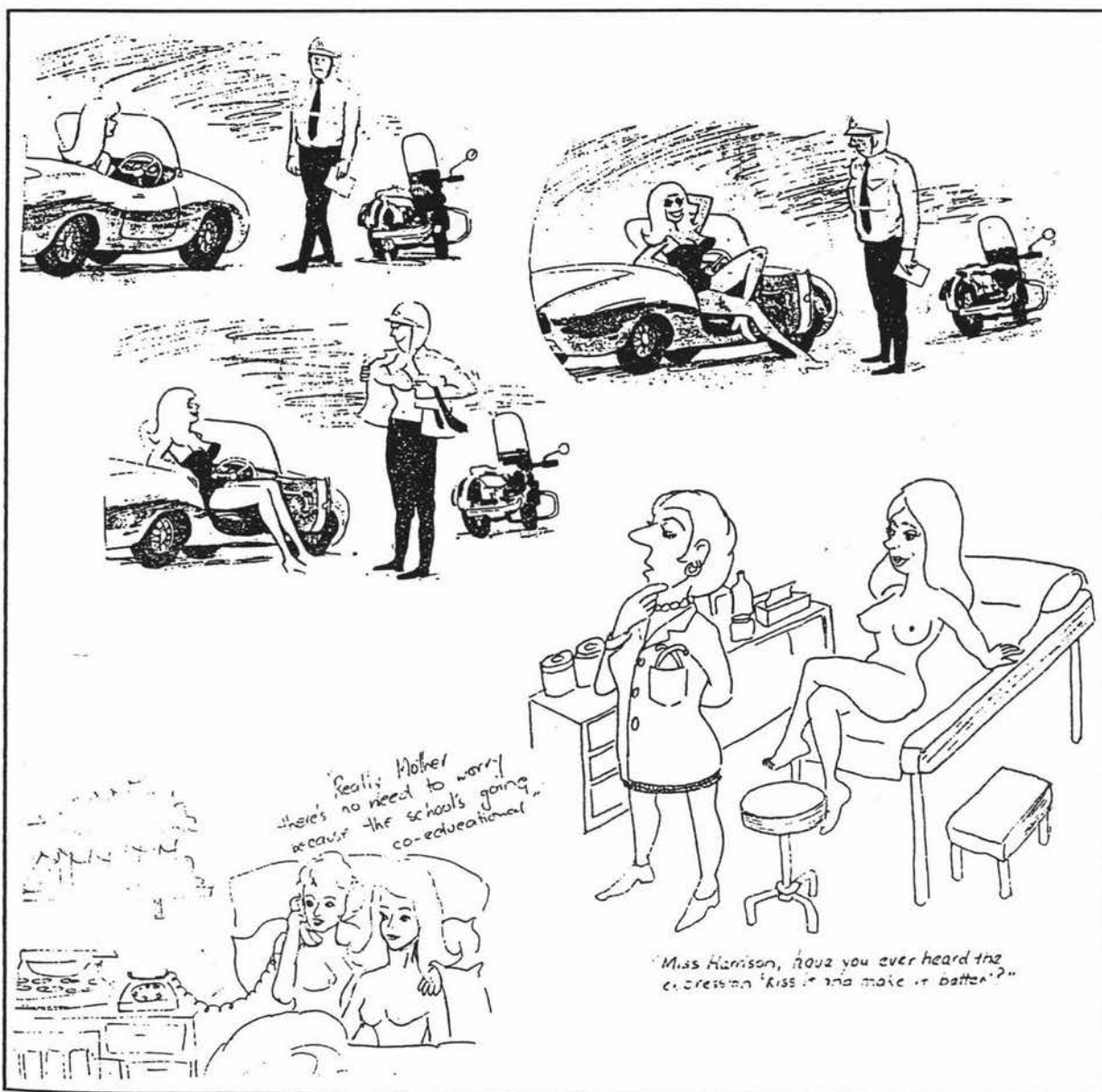


Figure 5: Cartoons from early *Circles*

magazines that I used to sneak a look at when I accompanied my father to the barber shop. They depict attractive, partly clad young women in vulnerable situations, such as those reproduced as Fig. 5, with the twist that the person in power is also a woman. They are innocent, and rather sad, as they replicate the same old, tired clichés about women's sexual vulnerability. Presumably their duplication in *Circle* was to indicate that women were asserting their right to be sexual, albeit in the same kinds of ways that men had.

However, *Circle* had been in existence only a few months before objections lead to removal of the cartoons, and the suggestion in *Circle 5* that the Collective put out a manual on women's sexuality. The headings suggested (pp28–29) were Physical dimensions, Mental and Physical aspects which affect physical sexuality, Types of relationships, Relationships of mother and daughter, Women's health, Lesbians as sexual radicals. The first part of this manual, a few pages about orgasm, does appear a few months later, in *Circle 10* (1974). The information in it, prepared by some Auckland lesbians, is almost all directly attributable to *Our Bodies, Ourselves*;<sup>74</sup> it is even entitled "Our Sexuality, Ourselves". It was actually published separately as a booklet at a later date, under the title of "Lesbian Sexuality".<sup>75</sup> A response to "Our Sexuality, Ourselves" in *Circle 12* (1974) includes praise for the lack of "coyness" in the descriptions and the illustrations. The writer goes on:

Artificial devices oral genital love making and sado masochism are all viable means of expressing infinite feelings of love we have for each other. To feel defensive or negate artificial devices is to ignore a very wonderful experience; stop being

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<sup>74</sup> Boston Women's Health Collective, 1st ed 1973.

<sup>75</sup> The actual publication date is unknown, but the cover matches that of a 1976 issue of *Circle*.

conned into thinking devices are 'penis' substitutes (p2). This is accompanied by explicit line drawings of two women making love.

*Our Bodies Ourselves* is itself reviewed in *Circle 9* (1974), with a special critique of the chapter "In America they call us Dykes" (sic), which emphasised lesbian as 'other'.<sup>76</sup> It includes the claim that heterosexual women "seem very much prepared to accept" lesbians, but gives no evidence for this (p9). In *Circle 10* is a complimentary review of a book by a Dr Seymour Fisher entitled *Female Orgasm*. Clearly, at this stage in the development of lesbian feminism in the New Zealand newsletters, it was still considered acceptable for men write about women's sexuality.

This focus on the sexual basis of lesbian identity is never again as strong in *Circle*. I have already discussed how artwork in the newsletters gradually became less explicitly sexual and more preoccupied with physical strength. There are book reviews from time to time of sex manuals for lesbians and other related books, such as *The Hite Report*;<sup>77</sup> occasional articles and personal responses about masturbation; and some fairly sexually explicit fiction. Latterly there are some light-weight acknowledgements that lesbians might want to meet each other to have sex, such as "What's my Line?" in *LIP 13* (1987), a competition to uncover the best chat-up line. This probably reflects a more relaxed attitude to sexuality in New Zealand society generally by the late 1980s. One of the few references to butch/femme roles in these later issues is another humorous

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<sup>76</sup> In the original text it was "In Amerika they call us Dykes", the variant spelling being a reference to the United States counter-culture's 'outsider' view of the American mainstream.

<sup>77</sup> Shere Hite, 1977. This book was "declared indecent in the hands of persons under 18 years of age by the New Zealand Indecent Publications Tribunal (*Circle 31*, 1979, p76).

article in *LIP* 12 (1987) entitled "The Butch/Femme Scale", in which readers were invited to complete a questionnaire to see where they fitted.

However, difficulties persisted for writers to the newsletters who wished to distance themselves from the acknowledgement of sexual interest as a basis for identity. Confusion deepened as the notion of certain actions as being 'male-identified' hardened. In a 1989 review of *Lesbian Passion* (LIP 21), the reviewer confesses:<sup>78</sup>

I've noticed that some women love vaginal penetration, and I've always had reservations about this because it's something men do to women. Joann explains. "Men don't have a corner on exploring vaginas" (p28).

Response to one's partner's sexual desires while making love might seem to be a most personal matter. Apparently some lesbians really did limit their sexual response because of a politically correct position, and then felt that Loulan was giving them permission, in a sense, to expand the boundaries of their lovemaking. However, would probably not have countenanced including the practices hotly debated at the 1981 Barnard Conference, which marked the turning point for what could be considered a feminist politics of sexuality (Vance, 1984).

Articles which promise to discuss 'sexuality' (eg *Circle* 27, pp12-3 and 30, pp63-5) often turn out to be about more general relationship problems.

These problems include a recognition that lesbians often feel isolated because they are trying to build new ways of relating, by using phrases like "not copying society's conventional standards for relationships" (*Circle*

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<sup>78</sup> A United States sex manual for lesbians by Joann Loulan, 1987. Loulan refers to lesbians who wish to define what is acceptable for lesbians to do in bed together as "the lesbian sex police". It follows her *Lesbian Sex*, which was, at one time, banned in New Zealand by the Indecent Publications Tribunal.

30, p63). In practice, this often meant facing the problems that accompanied non-monogamous life-styles.

#### Monogamy and commitment

The issue of non-monogamous relationships was one of the earliest issues to be raised in the newsletters. *Circle 3* carried an article entitled "Monogamy and the alternatives", which claimed that most lesbian relationships are based on the nuclear family model. However, because of social pressures on lesbians and the prevalence of the myth of romantic love, lesbian relationships tend to be short-lived. The writer seems to be advocating a system of a primary relationship, based on loving friendship, with room for casual romantic entanglements, to minimise the disruptive effects of sexual desire in lesbian lives:

Love is always beautiful, sex complicates it. If you can handle that complication of a third or fourth sexual affair in your twosome, well and good. If you can't, then let it be sisterly love (p6).

She suggests that lesbians should consider alternatives to monogamy to increase their personal stability and that of the community.

These issues did not appear again until a special 20 page section headed "Relationships" in *Circle 32* (1979), which contained several contributions. The second half is a taped discussion among the Collective about love and romance.

In the article "Falling in Love (Again)", the contributor attempts to examine the basis of attraction she feels for women with whom she has little in common, and her wish to have a secure basis for her relationships. She is confused because what she feels does not fit with how she thinks lesbian feminists should feel, but rather how she believes heterosexuals feel: "I

know in theory what I should and shouldn't do but in practice I behave differently" (41). Rather than enjoying the experience, she is blaming herself for being "wrong to want to own someone" (p41).

A more helpful attitude is taken by the writer of "When you cut out Romance - What's left?" She presents lesbians with a list of questions for discussion, in an attempt to try and untangle what lesbians want for their lover relationships. Although she claims to be very concerned with identifying and eliminating romance, which she thinks is "male-defined, structured and controlled" (p43), romance is defined as a relationship not based in friendship, but in an irrepressible, ultimately unworkable sexual attraction. It is, in the end, another plea for lesbians to develop asexual friendship-based lover relationships. In "'The Woman in your life is you'", the writer tells how much she is enjoying living alone as a celibate lesbian, even with its disadvantages.<sup>79</sup> But there is still a feeling of living in the context of a constant struggle to achieve some standard of 'correct' thinking and behaviour: "[t]here is still a difference between what I 'know' and what I 'do'....But still I know I am moving forward; and moving toward something worthwhile" (46).

The writer of "Celibacy, monogamy and fucking around" elides the issues so that it is difficult to know what exactly is being advocated. She uses a phrase that is revealing; she confesses to "a spurt of non-feminist relating in my life lately" (p46). She presumably means casual sex, as she immediately compares it to "the other extreme - supporting, caring, sharing." This is the paradigm of lesbian-feminist theory on lover

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<sup>79</sup> Title is credited to a song by Alix Dobkin, a lesbian singer who refuses to work with men at any part of the recording or performing process.

relationships – they are based either on sex or on loving friendship. There is the obligatory "mea culpa" for sins of the flesh, then the equally obligatory "Ave" in the general direction of the warm, fuzzy, security of the love of 'real' women.

Nowhere, in any of the newsletters, did I find an attempt to deconstruct, mediate, or otherwise make useful connections between sexual desire and long-term relationships. The erotic, if one is to believe the newsletters, is the enemy of true, long-term happiness. It is summed up by a contributor to *Circle 34* (1980):

I don't think I'd ever walk into a dance and think, there's a really attractive woman, I'd like to go to bed with her; that's never happened to me, because I really have to know someone well....I think that comes from being a lesbian-feminist and not just a sexual being – you just don't see them in terms of their body or their sexual potential for the night; you see them as total woman beings, who have feelings and thoughts.. (p10)

This viewpoint is not a rejection of romance, it simply another form of romantic vision. It still implies, despite all protestations to the contrary, that long-term happiness and fulfilment can be found by the individual, usually by entangling her life with someone else's, and usually by forgoing short-term physical satisfactions for long-term affection. Curiously, it is also a very similar stance to patriarchal notions of the dangerous irresistibility of female sexuality, and the need for it to be contained and repressed.

In contrast, the last article in this group under the heading "Relationships" is entitled "Monogamy = Monotony?". It is a plea for all lesbians to be committed to non-monogamy, as an anti-patriarchal gesture. The writer makes a claim for a commitment to monogamy on the basis that sexual relationships should help us grow and learn, so the more one has, the more

one grows and learns. She claims that monogamous relationships stifle growth and that women in them "have no external stimulation from other women to bring into their relationship, hence boredom" (p49). This generalisation reflects the writer's utopian fantasy of all women, everywhere, being open, receptive and loving toward each other, and assumes an essentialist view of women as being 'naturally' capable of such qualities.

The long discussion among members of the Collective that finishes this group of articles is repetitive, and contains very little new material. It does undermine the canonical views dispensed in the earlier articles, however, because the women talk about their own confusion and personal lives. One participant makes an important point:

...there is nowhere you can go to learn about lesbian relationships...we've only got us and we don't talk about it enough (p58).

Since this discussion was recorded (1979) there have been a trickle of self-help books for lesbians on relationships, mainly from the United States, with titles like *Lesbian Couples*, *Unbroken Ties: Lesbian Ex-lovers*, and *For Love and For Life: Lives of Lesbian Couples*. These books are generally non-directive and encourage lesbians to discuss openly the issues involved in both casual and committed relationships.

There was only one letter in response to the collection of articles in *Circle 32*. and it supported monogamy. However, an emotional article in *Circle 35* (1980) entitled "Love and Marriage don't go together" drew a violently angry response from two contributors, and a reasoned reply from another.

This article again takes the form of a discussion among Collective members,



who are really angry about the issue. They are against 'society' recognising gay relationships and giving benefits (eg bus passes) to gay couples, because that would make 'us' like 'them'. They see lesbian relationships as completely outside of and opposed to the heterosexual norm, and any attempt to 'normalise' same-sex relationships as absorption into the mainstream, a fate they are opposed to at all costs. They ask why lesbians would want to go through a form of marriage ceremony. One speaker suggests that it might be because people need validation for their feelings; that they feel a relationship is not 'real' until other people make it so. They feel it shows a lack of "lesbian pride" (p25), which they seem to understand as pride in being 'different'. They are also opposed to closed couple relationships, and they feel that lesbian marriage ceremonies emphasise the idea that being a lesbian is only about sexual relationships. They point out that the wider society is no more likely to accept lesbian couples who have gone through a ceremony of commitment than if they have not. They see non-lesbian feminists as 'using' the analysis of oppression that "political lesbians" have developed, then betraying the movement by "doing something shitty like getting married" (p26).

Responses to this article were swift and vehement. This is one of the few times that we can glimpse the existence of lesbian cultures other than lesbian-feminist in the pages of *Circle* or *LIP*. The first writer, who identifies as butch, says that getting married has been the greatest thing in her life as a lesbian; it has saved her from one-night stands and short, destructive relationships. She refers to the other woman as "my lady" and "my wife", and is proud that

I go out to work and earn the money, mow the lawns etc, while my wife stays home and pays the bills, cooks, sews, keeps the house clean and keeps herself attractive and feminine, she does this for me, and I for her, all in the confines of our

marriage...That's the way we live our lives, that's our right, isn't it?" (p40)

She also claims that their marriage is "eons away from two straits (sic) for sure!" However, she is vague about exactly how it is different. But she is quite clear about the roots of her lesbian identity: "As I see it, what is lesbianism, if it isn't mainly sexual preference?" She believes in God, thinks lesbians shouldn't be barred from anything, and would like the Catholic Church to recognise gays.

The second reply is so angry it is painful to read. The writers are not feminists, and they claim that feminists have caused those who wish to be 'gay' (as opposed to feminist) and get married to leave 'the scene' and become isolated. This is a claim made in other texts, for example in Feinberg (1993), for the United States, but this is a rare example of it published in New Zealand writing. Directly countering the claim that lesbians who marry are 'using' the work done by political lesbians, these writers claim that the political lesbians use non-feminist lesbians to boost their numbers of supporters, and don't support their lifestyle choices:

You don't believe in marriage taking place in a church. Well we don't believe in you little girls prancing around the streets carrying dirty little placards with silly little sayings on them, swearing your mouths off and pushing lesbianism into society like you do. You aren't getting anywhere. It's just a waste of time. (pp45-6).

Much of the rest is incoherent and confusing. But the anger is real, and it finishes with an expression of prejudice against formerly heterosexual women and non-monogamous women.

The final response to "Love and Marriage don't go together" is from a well-known lesbian theorist. She makes a superb plea for tolerance to be exercised by lesbian feminists on issues of lifestyle choices within the

lesbian community,. While rejecting the notion of marriage (as it presently exists) as a feminist, she affirms the right of every lesbian to live her life as she wishes, and sees that, while political theory may abhor marriage rituals, various lesbians must feel they have a right to enact them:

"The sensitive radical must be prepared to extend supportive attitudes toward the lesbian monogamist. Let us not divide the lesbian community on essentially non-issues, but attempt to include within it all possible viewpoints within a general framework of logical policy (p44, original emphasis).

She goes on to unpack the legal contract that our society calls marriage. She points out that it has largely been co-opted by men, but that doesn't mean that the idea of regularly renewable public contracts ("Community Contracts") for lesbian relationships is automatically a bad one. However, the way marriage is seen and enacted would have to change first - something she suggests might be worth fighting for as a community. This would, indeed, be an example of useful politicisation of the personal. There is no indication it has ever been attempted, perhaps because the rise in social acceptability of de facto heterosexual relationships in the 1980s effectively changed how New Zealand society sees marriage relationships.

The only other article to consider relationships in depth is in *LIP 13* (1987), and it is, potentially, very interesting. It consists of summaries of the findings of researchers, mostly from overseas, found in the *Journal of Homosexuality*. The material is presented because "it seems important the information available from such journals be shared with as many lesbians as possible and not kept by the few with access privilege" (p27). However, none of the origins of the material summarised are clarified, and it is not even clear who summarised it or for what purpose.<sup>80</sup> There is no

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<sup>80</sup> I would assume this was done for academic purposes; it was possibly an assignment that required some kind of literature review.

referencing or accreditation whatsoever.

The discussions on relationships and friendships which appeared in the newsletters are based on a fixed view of identity that is continually trying to hierarchise differences. Personal exchanges that lesbians might engage in are reduced to a series of power imbalances, rather than being indicative of affection or respect. Politicising these personal exchanges, that is examining them for their 'correctness' in the light of essentialist notions of what a lesbian is, did not to increase the possibilities that contact with another human being might open up. Rather it created a climate where limits and boundaries, at least partly based on a fear of the power of female sexuality, were emphasised as crucial to the integrity of the lesbian community. This integrity was related back to the notion of women as basically tender, loving, and not very sexual, and to the idea that lesbians were the most 'natural' kind of women.

### Violence

The movement to identify lesbian concerns within feminism, combined with a desire for lesbians to discuss issues in lesbian-only space, led to many lesbians within the Refuge Movement and Rape Crisis forming separate caucuses within their organisations. *LIP 12* (1987) printed a letter from a Refuge worker concerned about the problem of homophobia in the Refuge movement, and asking what the options for abused lesbians might be, as they would probably not be welcome at their local refuge. She asks for feedback from other lesbians involved in Refuge. She also wanted opinions on the problem of lesbian domestic violence in general.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> I use the term "lesbian domestic violence" to indicate violence, mental, physical or emotional, between lesbians who live together or are in an intimate relationship. I do not intend this to refer to consensual sado-

The following year, *LIP 16* reported that the 1987 Annual General Meeting of Refuge had set up a lesbian caucus, to "provide support for both paid and volunteer lesbian workers" (p3), and that the National Collective of Rape Crisis and Related Groups had also set up a lesbian caucus. Lesbians working with Refuge stated two objectives: to make heterosexual Refuge workers aware of issues of homophobia, and to confront the issue of lesbian domestic violence. What had been seen as a personal, psychological problem for individual batterers became a political issue for lesbians, both among themselves and in their interfaces with the feminist Refuge movement.

This must have been a difficult issue for some lesbian feminists working in the Refuge movement. The very first article in *Circle 2* (1974) deplores the "incidence of so-called 'drama', among gay women's groups" (p1). It explains that this 'drama' is often terrible violence, which is treated as humorous by the community. She pleads for women to act to stop violence when it happens, and to work to accept each other, "and show by our example that we are better, more loving people than the rest of society" (p2). This drew no response, and it is five years before violence again features in the newsletters.

In *Circle 31* there are a range of articles on violence, intended as a start for discussion. The contributors all consider themselves 'working class', and some think that violence is a completely normal way to release frustration. One points out that non-violent people can be psychologically coercive

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masochism. I find it interesting that the current terminology in general use in New Zealand to signify what used to be called domestic violence is "family violence"; this effectively renders the problem of gay and lesbian domestic violence invisible, or puts it in another category from heterosexual domestic violence.

instead, which she considers to be a middle-class form of violence. One is realising that she has a build-up of anger that she can't release, and thinks "violence can be useful, or at least I want to be able to defend and fight for me and other women" (p8). A piece headed "Fists up Sappho (Poetry readings later)" explains violence as a politically useful and important part of lesbian activism: "...its (sic) just another of those things we have to learn - like writing, organising, talking in groups, or playing softball" (p12, my emphasis). The violence she is referring to, unlike the other contributors, is street violence - retaliation against the verbal insults she perceives from men. Seeing it as a form of necessary self-defence, she is scornful of lesbians who don't believe in violence, and feels unsafe when she is out with them. This is a rare view expressed in the newsletters in direct contradiction to the central ideas of cultural feminism.

Not all the contributors to this discussion think violence is good or useful. One woman uses violent fantasies as a therapy to stop herself using actual violence, and is frightened of her own propensities. A woman who used to run a lesbian bar finds violence abhorrent, and another who used to be easily provoked has now conquered her violent responses. One woman mentions learning self-defence as protection, specifically against men. The last article is a useful analysis of the difference between creative non-violence, a politically helpful way of resolving conflict, and the denial and repression of anger and conflict, which the writer sees as self-destructive and leading to the violence born of frustration.

As an attempt to provoke discussion about violence, this article failed. There was no response published in *Circle 32*, and the only one in *Circle 33* contained the following:

within a love relationship a certain degree of controlled violence is acceptable, even necessary and normal...a belt given in anger is part of the complex expression of loving - but I contend that a woman who beats her friend with intent to really harm and hurt her, or who fights with other women is no better than the men who also do these things and from whom we are trying to be free! (p14).

There was no further response on this issue.

As the beliefs of lesbian feminism are predicated on the presumption that women are inherently less violent than men, in theory lesbian relationships should be less prone to violence. A contributor to *Circle 31's* discussion explains why women may be violent:

Violence is an unnatural extension of anger that is forced upon women by a male-dominated society. If women were not oppressed and had not had to co-exist with men for so many thousand years the violent feelings that we have would never have had any chance to develop.... Violence is caused by fear and frustration, both of which stem from women's oppression by men (p13-4).

Indeed, even today many lesbians would deny that 'real' lesbians can be moved to violence, and, faced with the fact that lesbians are sometimes very violent toward each other, would dismiss the batterers as 'male-identified'. This is similar to the response, discussed in Chapter Three, to discussions about alcohol problems of lesbians: violence is made into a personal problem, which will disappear when lesbian feminism is fully understood and accepted. For lesbians to admit violence as a human failing and a community problem to be brought out into the open, and asking the Refuge movement to consider allowing lesbians who have been battered by their partners to be admitted, would not have been a universally popular move.

The report in *LIP 23* (1991) of the women in the Maori Caucus of the Lesbian Refuge Workers Hui feel that "Maori dykes have always been

stereotyped as violent" (p10). To be fair, there has been no indication of this in the pages of the newsletters. The only stereotyping on this issue occurs in *Circle 31*. One of the contributors to the article on violence claims that working-class lesbians are more likely to be violent than middle-class lesbians.<sup>82</sup> She suggests that the women who are most likely to lash out will stay away from discussions, "while the middle-class lesbians get all concerned about why working-class lesbians aren't there!" (p7).

At the 1988 Women's Studies Conference, a Workshop on the problem of Lesbian Domestic Violence was held, and the full Workshop report was released only through the lesbian media - presumably an attempt to make lesbians face up to the issue of violence within the community, as well as to keep the problem 'in-house'. The Workshop report, given in *LIP 19*, uses the criteria designed by refuge to define a 'violent relationship', and points out that

lesbian domestic violence cuts across race, class, size differences, butch/femme roles, etc. It does not correspond with these or other (known) factors in lesbian relationships (p9).

This is the first attempt reported in the newsletters to really come to terms with lesbian domestic violence. *LIP 21* (1989) has over 15 pages devoted to the issue, much of it excerpted from books from the United States, but with input from local lesbians in the form of poetry and personal accounts. Finally, it seems, the lived experiences of lesbians are being reported, not as a muddle of essentialisms, not idealised, not used as examples of 'male-identification', but as the basis for a theory that might be politically useful.

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<sup>82</sup> This contributor identifies as working class, and regrets that she hasn't "thrown a few quick, well-directed punches" (p7) from time to time to get her point across in discussion.



By 1991, an article in *LIP 23* reports on the existence of the Auckland Safe House Network for lesbians. The writer's pain is clear. She has felt personally oppressed by the refusal of the lesbian community to discuss or even accept the possibility that lesbian relationships might be unsafe, and she has acted to help by setting up for safe houses for lesbians alone, and by working with "a lesbian-friendly refuge" for lesbians with children. There is also a report in the same issue from LAVPAC, a group set up to look specifically to look at issues around violence in the lesbian community.<sup>83</sup>

The politicising of issues around violence in the New Zealand lesbian newsletters was muddled and confused by the dominance of cultural feminist ideals among contributors. Those who wished to claim that violence might be a useful tool in the establishment and defence of safe places for lesbians were forced to defend their views against the charge of being 'male-identified'. The solving of disputes, in any arena, by violent means, was seen as not politically correct, and was cast as a personal problem if it was used in disputes between or among lesbians.

The spread of less essentialised ideas about identity at the end of the 1980s brought a contextualising of violence in the newsletters. There is evidence that lesbians were more prepared to acknowledge lesbian domestic violence as a problem for lesbian communities. Self-defence is not an issue that was often raised in the newsletters; it may have been an area that some of the collectives felt ambivalent about at some periods.

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<sup>83</sup> LAVPAC: Lesbians Against Violence, Power and Control.

## Race and Racism

So far I have covered some issues of personal relationships between and among lesbians discussed in the pages of the newsletters in terms of their political relationship to what were claimed as the tenets of lesbian feminism. One of the most difficult, and hardly discussed at all, was the issue of racism as a problem for individual lesbians. It was presented as a wider social problem, but the only real challenge for individuals come when first one lesbian social venue in Auckland, and then another, attempted to prevent Maori lesbians from entering.

In *LIP 18* (1988), a Maori woman being interviewed about Koha, the custom of giving to a host, talks about how she sees political involvement as basic to being Maori.<sup>84</sup> She points out that more people supported the Aboriginal Land Rights March than the Waitangi March. She goes on to question the commitment to by Pakeha to Maori issues. She argues that Pakeha should keep asking themselves each day what they have done for change, and that Maori should put Maori first. She finishes with the statement: "That's why I say that the personal is the political" (p24). This is the only direct attempt in the newsletters to encourage Pakeha lesbians to get involved in race issues, apart from the reporting of demonstrations, which will be discussed in Chapter Six. Yet, in the wider context of New Zealand society, feminists were writing, teaching and creating strategies about racism in comprehensive ways. The limiting of 'the political' to what directly affected newsletter contributors, that is to the personal, as I discussed in Chapters Two and Four, is very clearly demonstrated by this omission.

On the whole, Maori lesbians did not seem to find *Circle* able to provide a

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<sup>84</sup> This article was reprinted from *Broadsheet*.

useful forum for their ideas, but *LIP*, perhaps because it was Auckland based, often included contributions from Maori dykes giving their interpretations of Maori controversies, such as the events at the Whare Paia at Carrington Hospital in 1989 (*LIP* 20). *LIP* 18 (1988) was a special issue, discussed in more detail in Chapter Six. It was put out by Wahine Mo Nga Wahine o Te Moana Nui a Kiwa, who describe themselves as "A Tamaki based group of Maori and Pacific Lesbians" (p2).<sup>85</sup> However, there is little analysis of identity issues, other than in the article about Koha mentioned above, although it does include a report of the alleged discrimination being practised by the Staircase nightclub.

This comes after a long history of problems between some Maori lesbians and the proprietors of the Alexander Tavern, a pub frequented by lesbians, in the early 1980s. Accusations of racism against the proprietors began in December of 1981. They continued to be made, with the addition of charges of classism after the public bar was upgraded, mainly in the pages of *DykeNews* (eg issue 20, Jan 1983) but even as late as 1985 in the first issue of *LIP*. One of the main issues with both this 'dykecott' and the accusations against Staircase seems to be that Maori working-class lesbians had been slowly squeezed out of places for socialising by the demand for middle-class, more sophisticated venues by Pakeha lesbians. Like the 'gay' women whose views I quoted in the section about commitment and monogamy, these women feel disenfranchised and displaced by the more 'respectable' Pakeha lesbian feminists.

The linking of the personal and the political in the newsletters around a variety of issues is the focus of a speech which *LIP* 4 (1985) reports

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<sup>85</sup> The Maori name for Auckland is Tamaki Makaurau

verbatim. It was given by a Maori lesbian at a Gay and Lesbian Rights March. She challenges the white gay movement to link the issues of oppression, and see who the enemy really is. She points out that "the right wing coalition" (p17) has no difficulty linking feminism, anti-racism, anti-nuclear feeling and communism, and thinks 'we' should do the same. However, I believe it is in unlinking these ideas and examining each of them for usefulness that lesbian strength lies. Lesbians are able to act as unlinkers, as dis-connectors by our very lives. For example, this article is finished by the photograph from the March of a young woman and child with the caption "Lesbian Mothers are everywhere". The very term 'lesbian mother' acts as a unlinking and re-linking, and can act as subversive, that is providing a 'sub-version' of life, by unlinking the negative associations made in wider society around the notions of 'lesbian', discussed in Chapter Two above, and of 'mother', and relinking them in a new way. This is how the personal can be effectively political: by living lesbian lives differently in the midst of heterosexual expectations.

### Summary

In this chapter I have looked at how issues which are generally considered personal, especially issues around personal relationships, were made 'political' in the newsletters. Other issues that I have not dealt with, but which were written about, include health and spiritual issues, music, novels and other leisure activities, issues around lesbian pregnancy and relationships with children. The playing of sport by lesbians was a regular feature, especially in *LIP*, and there was a small flurry of discussion about the politics of competitive team sports in *Circle 36* (1981). There was, to my surprise, very little on the problems lesbians might encounter with their families of origin, or on friendships or working relationships with

heterosexual people. This may be a further indication that the newsletter collectives saw the lesbian community they as served as separate from 'society'.

The 'identity' that is assumed for lesbians in the readings I have presented so far is almost always based on a clearly essentialised idea of 'woman' as representing peace, nurturing and life. Lesbians, because they are relatively free from 'male' influence, should exemplify these characteristics in their daily lives. These ideas about identity were seen as the safe, secure basis for all other theorising, and enabled all judgements to be made from a fixed point of 'correctness', based on this ideal of womanhood.

'Difference' was ignored, avoided, made into a problem for the individual, or glossed over. In a desire to homogenise lesbian lives, experience was accepted as valid only if it was oriented to the main axis of identity: the oppression of lesbian women, by 'society'. All other oppression sprang from that source (see also Phelan 1989). Lesbians were free, natural women, the vanguard of true womanhood. As a basis for living in a complex modern society, this identity was less than adequate. However, its proponents continued to use essentialising ideas about gender, sexuality and social interaction as unquestioned doctrines. In the next chapter I will present some evidence of what happened when these doctrines were applied to some political events in New Zealand society that had a direct impact on lesbians.

## Chapter Six: Personalising the political

### Introduction

During the period that this study covers, there were only a few national events that the lesbian newsletters presented as particularly affecting lesbians. In this chapter I will look at how the newsletters presented these issues: the pressure to reform the laws that outlawed male homosexual acts, legislation to protect gays and lesbians from discrimination in various areas of their lives, the relationships of lesbian activism to mainstream feminist enterprises, and how the newsletters reported lesbian participation in the war against racism, both within New Zealand and in Australia.

### Homosexual Law Reform

A continuing theme in gay activism presented in the newsletters is the difficulty that lesbians had in working with gay men. I have mentioned in Chapter Two the report in *Broadsheet* from a lesbian activist who had been beaten up by gay men at a party in 1973. A contributor to *Circle 5* (1974) is sad that, after the 1974 Gay Liberation Conference, she feels she can no longer work in the "homophile organisations" (p2). As she sees it, these do not work for women. Of course, as these groups generally had the focus of reforming the laws that were considered to principally affect gay men, it is not surprising that they did not particularly meet the needs of lesbians.

She advises lesbians to work for the women's movement, as they will have more satisfaction and get more done. In the same issue of *Circle*, however, there is a positive report of the same Conference, commenting positively on the attendance of the press.

Gay organisations have usually had a good relationship with the press in New Zealand, in contrast to the problems experienced by feminist organisations, as detailed below in the discussion about the United Women's Conventions. Lesbians still do not, apparently, trust members of the mainstream press to report on their conferences.<sup>86</sup> It seems that the media, at least in the 1970s, felt that gay rights was such a pipe-dream that they did not need to take it seriously, whereas the more immediate threat to New Zealand's stability represented by the spread of feminism resulted in their treating the United Women's Conventions semi-humorously to lessen their impact.

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This 1974 Gay Rights Conference apparently had no problem with the inclusion of bi-sexuals among gay people: "the word 'gay' encompasses anyone who supports sexual freedom, rather than being confined within the boundaries of homosexuality" (p14).<sup>87</sup> They seem to have structured those who attended into three categories of gay: the 'drag', the homosexual and the lesbian, and the Conference agreed that the 'drag' and the bisexual

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<sup>86</sup> There was no mainstream press coverage of the 1995 Lesbian Studies Conference at Victoria University.

<sup>87</sup> *Circle 5* had earlier given the definition of "gay" as "a person who has the ability to relate emotionally, mentally and physically to a person of the same sex. This definition is by no means an indication of the person's homosexuality or bi-sexuality" (p6).

were especially oppressed.<sup>88</sup> There has been a shift to current meanings of 'gay', which now refers almost exclusively to men. It seems to me interesting that the slippage in meaning over time has now allotted the once unsexed word 'gay' mostly to men. This, of course, is precisely what some lesbian theorists are afraid will happen with the word 'queer'. In the newsletters, attitudes toward the inclusion of bisexual women in the lesbian community gradually hardened with the development of the separatist strands of lesbian-feminist theorising; the contentious 1989 Gay and Lesbian Conference was reported as ending with a statement from 40 of the lesbians present that bisexual women "are not a part of the lesbian community" (*LIP* 20 p18).<sup>89</sup>

The first mention of political involvement with gay men on the issue of homosexual law reform comes in *Circle 10* (1974), with the report of a gay picket at the National Party Conference, publicising the current movement to liberalise the laws relating to homosexuality. The mood is reported as militant: gays want repeal not reform, rights not concessions. Lesbians write they are supporting gay men in this "because we, as women, and as gay women know the full meaning of oppression and have been denied too long the right to a full existence" (p27, original emphasis).

The history of attempts at Homosexual Law Reform in New Zealand are fairly complicated. The first was in 1975, with a Private Member's Bill presented to Parliament by Hon. Venn Young, a Cabinet Member of the National Party

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<sup>88</sup> "The term 'drag' was adopted by the Conference as a general term to describe drag 'queens', transvestites, transsexuals and hermaphrodites" (p15).

<sup>89</sup> At least one lesbian present publicly voiced her disagreement with this statement.



in government at the time. Private Member's Bills are rarely permitted to progress very far in the New Zealand legislative system; they are often intended to make a point, or act as a starting point for public discussion.<sup>90</sup> Unusually, Venn Young's Bill was permitted to go through the full process of passing into law, only failing at the last hurdle of a full conscience vote of all Members of Parliament by 34 votes to 29, with 23 members absent. An article in *Circle 15* (1975) gives an excellent overview of the working of the select committee on the Crimes Amendment Bill (the Young Bill). The workings of the legislative process are considered arcane and esoteric by most citizens, and the article usefully includes details, in a separate box, about how a select committee works, and a summary of the main points of some of the submissions.

However, not all of the amendments proposed by this Bill were going to be of benefit to gay men and lesbians. The age of consent for homosexual sexual activity was proposed to be 21; it was 16 for heterosexuals and there was no age of consent for lesbian sexual activity, which was considered unimportant under the law.<sup>91</sup> Keeping a brothel for homosexuals was not at the time illegal; the Young Bill would have put homosexual brothels on the same legal footing as heterosexual ones, and some lesbians were concerned that this could make any house where lesbians were living liable to be raided by the police, on the pretext it was being used as a "place of resort for the commission of indecent acts...between females" (Photocopy of the draft Bill, *Circle 11*, 1974, p10). It is hard to say, now,

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<sup>90</sup> An excellent example in 1995 was Michael Walls's Bill on Voluntary Euthanasia.

<sup>91</sup> The only mention of lesbian sexual activity on the New Zealand statutes at the time was Section 139 of the Crimes Act, which forbade sexual activity between a woman over the age of twenty-one and a girl under the age of sixteen.

whether these fears were justified. I was personally involved in the fight to end compulsory military training for young men in New Zealand in 1972, and certainly the police raided the homes of some of those involved in that campaign on very flimsy pretexts. The Security Intelligence Service had high public credibility in the 1970s, and Civil Rights for those deemed 'outside' the mainstream were not well developed in New Zealand in the 1970s.

Lesbians from the Sisters for Homophile Equality found it necessary to make their own submissions to the Select Committee on the Young Bill, because they did not trust either the members of the Homosexual Law Reform Society, the conservative body, or the Gay Liberation Front, which represented the more radical view. Four members of SHE, attending the 1975 Annual General Meeting of the Society, reported in *Circle 13-14* (1974-5) that the president of the Society had read neither the Bill he was campaigning to change, nor the alternative Bill that had been drafted by his committee. They were also unimpressed with the Reform Society's attitude of not upsetting the public, and with the fact that the Reform Society considered the Gay Liberation Front too radical. The lesbians reporting feel that the Reform Society represents the best chance for homosexual views to be heard by mainstream New Zealand, and that it is "a great pity" (p7) the Society could not be more open to the views of lesbians.

After *Circle 14*, the Bill disappears from the pages of the newsletters. There is no information about how the Members of Parliament voted. Although this information was widely reported in the daily newspapers in New Zealand, it is unfortunate that the only national lesbian magazine/newsletter at the

time completely ignored the end of the campaign.

At the end of 1976, political campaigning on gay and lesbian issues began again in earnest with the founding of the National Gay Rights Coalition, with both of the national office-holders being women. According to *Circle 26*, this group was born from the realisation that there was considerable fragmentation in gay and lesbian groups, resulting in "widespread wastage of talents and person power within the gay movement in New Zealand" (p33). The national officers write to ask that lesbian groups consider affiliating to the Coalition, so that lesbians can use the higher media profile of gay men, and swell the numbers of gay people the Coalition can claim to represent. They claim that lesbians can be assured that their involvement will help ensure the revolutionary nature of the movement, given that the highest profile reform organisation is conservative in its approach, depending on rationale rather than publicity for its base.

Not all lesbians were easily convinced of the political effectiveness of such a move. I have already documented prejudice against men, including gay men, in the newsletters. There is ample evidence of the difficulty in making coalitions between gay men and lesbian feminists work at that time. Differences between the groups were marked out by the essentialist thinking of some lesbian feminists, and a corresponding lack of political analysis among many gay men. A correspondent to *Circle 30* feels her analysis has been used and abused too often, by both heterosexual feminists and gay men, and she has resolved "not to do more than my 50% of the work in any political relationship" (p3).<sup>92</sup> Although this is

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<sup>92</sup> See also Phelan 1989 on the need for lesbians working in coalitions, work she calls "hard and painful" (p169), to feel supported by other lesbians.

completely understandable, it was frustrating for gay men, who saw the issue of homosexual law reform as an end in itself, not as a means of political education. As they saw it, they were oppressed by the existence of an unjust law, and its removal was their primary goal.

Examples of closed-minded opinions about gay men in the newsletters, based on ignorance and prejudice, are legion. A review of the United States documentary film "Word is Out" in *Circle 30* (1978) says in part:

Of course the women were the best part of the film. They seemed to be much happier than the men, and have a much stronger sense of purpose in their lives - while there was an emptiness, perhaps a shallowness in some of the men....The women had come much further than the men, dropping the stereotypes and role-playing (there was one couple who looked butch and femme, but said they didn't have roles - and there was no reason not to believe them), whereas there were a few men with lisps or campy voices and gaudy clothes (p66-7, original emphasis).

Again, as pointed out in earlier chapters, questions of style take on political significance in an essentialist framework. It is difficult for lesbian feminists with fixed ideas about gender difference to work and empathise with, or even to like, any man, because they have constructed maleness as the enemy of everything that 'real women', lesbians, stand for. A lesbian writing in *LIP 2* (1985) reports herself "surprised" (p2) at how much she was affected by the film "The Life and Times of Harvey Milk".<sup>93</sup> Another was surprised at how easy it was to meet with young gay men at a Law Reform rally.<sup>94</sup> Earlier, a contributor to *Circle 30* (1978), in the herstory article "Circle ...From the Beginning", the significance of which has been discussed in Chapter Four, had stated categorically "there is no way a gay

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<sup>93</sup> Harvey Milk was a local body politician in San Francisco, and the first openly gay man to hold a high elected office in the United States. He was assassinated, along with the Mayor of San Francisco, in 1978.

<sup>94</sup> She attributes the fact they were easy to get along with to the influence of feminism "on at least a few men out there" (p8).

male magazine can cater for lesbians' needs" (p40). However, in the same issue was another tantalising trace of a whole other lesbian life: a brief report on a quiet but successful Gay Pride week in Wellington in which lesbians seem to have been very involved.

Also in *Circle 30* is a report of violent clashes between gay men, lesbians and the police in Sydney in June of 1978. The aftermath of that demonstration brought to a head the simmering dispute between reformist gay men and radical lesbian women, with the men blaming the women for the demonstrations getting out of hand, and the women berating the men for their lack of understanding of the strength of reactionary religious groups in society. Certainly, the situation in the United States at the time, and which would exist in New Zealand within five years, vindicated the stand taken by the lesbian feminists. Political activity aimed at increasing the human rights of gay men and lesbians would at first bring the wrath of organised Christianity down on homosexuals in general, but would eventually polarise the public and allow for a climate of greater tolerance toward 'queer' people of many stripes.

To return to 1978, however, the article on the situation in Sydney continues with a thoughtful assessment of how lesbian feminists might fit into the National Gay Rights Coalition. Instead of being wholly negative, it suggests that lesbians need to be more disciplined and focused on their analysis of daily life for lesbians. It looks beyond the immediate goal of law reform and civil rights for homosexuals to creating a useful basis for discussion on lesbian life in New Zealand. Unfortunately, the next period of *Circle's* production contains some of the most violent, angry, and least focused analysis of any of the newsletters, except perhaps the later *LIPs*. I

have already discussed some of these articles in Chapter Five, especially those on monogamy, commitment and other relationship issues. There is no indication in the newsletters of analysis being carried out on the lines suggested in this article, although I am assured it was going on in other forums.<sup>95</sup>

The next mention of the National Gay Rights Coalition in the newsletters is the 1980 Conference (*Circle 34*). There was almost total rejection by the men present of the suggestion by lesbians that their small numbers required a constitutional safeguard of their interests. This resulted in the resignation of the (lesbian) secretary, and the withdrawal of the only two coalition members which had represented lesbian interests. A second report from a woman who had no previous interest or experience in either gay or lesbian politics confirms the former secretary's view that "the men were more concerned with their own problems, policies, etc, rather than those of the lesbians" (p71).

This was a time of great organising for gay activists. Despite the demise of the Young Bill five years earlier, Hon Warren Freer, also a National Cabinet Minister, was planning another attempt to have male homosexual activity legalised. However, like the Young Bill, this attempt did not get universal support from gay activists, because some of the clauses would have actually restricted the current rights of lesbians, and because it would still not have put the restrictions on homosexual activity onto the same basis as those on heterosexual activity. There was violent opposition to the Freer Bill from both conservative members of Parliament, who threatened to match it with draconian Bills to restrict lesbian activity, and from gay and lesbian

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<sup>95</sup> Thanks to Lynne Star for this.

activists, and it was dropped. It never rated more than a brief mention in the Editorial of *Circle 34*.

The last, and eventually successful, attempt at Homosexual Law Reform in New Zealand was sponsored by Fran Wilde, the Member of Parliament for Wellington central.<sup>96</sup> However, unlike the earlier attempts, it was supported by a large number of the caucus of Ms Wilde's own Labour party, which came to power in 1984, and was drafted in concert with gay activists, who had become much more politically aware in the previous ten years. There is a preliminary note in *Circle 43* (1984) on the possibility of a Homosexual Law Reform Bill, and how it might affect lesbians by writing in an age of consent for lesbian sexual activity, as well as a possibility of its extending the Human Rights legislation to prevent discrimination against homosexuals. For New Zealanders, this battle between liberals and conservatives on a sexual matter was reminiscent of the abortion rights struggles in the mid to late 1970s. There were petitions, submissions, rallies, and speeches to support both sides of the argument, and, as usual, many lesbians found themselves expending much energy in organising, arguing and supporting. The outcome was to be less than they hoped.

The reporting of the events over the next two years appears in the early issues of *LIP*. *LIP 1* (1985) explains very clearly why lesbians should work for Homosexual Law Reform: it is a fight for fundamental human rights on the part of an oppressed minority; it is part of a larger fight against a right-wing political force that would obliterate all traces of lesbian life;

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<sup>96</sup> Ms Wilde was not a lesbian, and many lesbians did not entirely trust her. As the focus of the campaign was the reform of the laws affecting men, many lesbians were offended and distanced by what they saw as Ms Wilde's disregard for them. Fran Wilde left Parliament in 1987, and became the Mayor of Wellington. She recently retired to enter business.

lesbians must speak for themselves and not be subsumed under the heading of "the affluent white men of the Gay Task Force" (p3).

The report goes on to detail how Auckland lesbians decided to work with gay men on this issue. They set up a Lesbian Coalition, open to all lesbians, which would work alongside the Gay Task Force from a strong base of lesbian solidarity. In that way, lesbians could feel that their individual position was protected; they would be able to resist feeling patronised. In fact, the men guilty of treating the lesbian activists this way were only displaying their ignorance of the history of lesbian activism. Many of them were simply not aware of the depth of experience that lesbians could offer in theorising and planning their lives from a position 'outside' mainstream political thinking. Also offered in *LIP 1* was a list of practical things lesbians could do to help the cause of Law Reform: Write to Members of Parliament and other "public figures"; write to newspapers especially correcting mis-information and "anti-gay bigots"; and get your friends to do the same. A form letter to send to Members of Parliament is included.<sup>97</sup>

One of the more interesting reports of a speech by a lesbian during this campaign is from a member of Wahine Mo Nga Wahine O Te Moana Nui A Kiwa at the Lesbian/Gay Conference in Poneke (Wellington) in 1985 in *LIP 4*. She makes a stirring statement, linking the struggle for homosexual law reform and human rights for gays to the struggle to eliminate racism. Given that most of the activists were white men, with conventional backgrounds, her

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<sup>97</sup> I was working for an extremely conservative fundamentalist Christian Member of Parliament at the time. In his case these letters were replied to with a form letter and filed, but I know that many of the less certain Members did at least count how many came in to them.



analysis of the situation, especially her emphasis on difference as strength, pointed out that there is often more than one way to achieve a desired goal. As I outlined in Chapter Five, this speech, with its laying bare of the realities of the complexities of the relationships that Maori lesbians maintain with their whanau, is a frustratingly rare acknowledgement of 'difference' within lesbian feminism.

One of the most galvanising aspects of the campaign against Homosexual Law Reform was the organising of a petition by Christian groups. There were myriad stories of people being emotionally blackmailed at their churches or places of employment into signing this document. In *LIP 1*, some Wellington lesbians report that petition was the mobilising force for many lesbians who might have thought that Law Reform was a men's issue, or that their closeted position made them safe from attack by anti-gay forces. This is an illustration of the point that I made in Chapter Three, that individual lesbians may be more moved to react politically by homophobia that seems directed at them personally than by "the dominant ideology's heterosexism" (Jagose 1988a, p177). The power of emotion among New Zealanders on the issue of homosexuality was focused by the petition, both among its supporters and detractors, and in the way it revealed to homosexual people how tenuous their apparently safe social position was.

Lesbian and Gay Visibility week in June of 1985 was a focus for rallies to support the Bill, which had by then been before Parliament on the first of its three readings, and was in the long stage of being put through the Select Committee process, where submissions are sought from the public.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> The Select Committee for this Bill consisted of Hon Helen Clark (later to be Leader of the Labour Party) and Richard Northey, both liberal Labour members, and Mervyn Wellington (an avowed Christian) and Sir Robert

*LIP 2* reports that the media were slow to pick up on the newsworthiness of the events, but the numbers attending gay gatherings forced them to reassess the importance of what was happening. Certainly, gay men and lesbians foresaw victory for Wilde's Bill, although they knew it would be hard-won against well-funded conservative groups.

Those conservative groups were very verbal in their attacks on lesbians and gay men, repeating all the old myths that connect homosexuals with disease, disorder and paedophilia. A contributor to *LIP 2* reports that she found it difficult to listen to speeches and read reports quoting vicious lies about her self and her life. But for lesbians, the alternative was the invisibility they constantly resisted. In the event, the extreme rhetoric of conservative groups probably swung liberals around to support for the Reform cause.

One of the tools used by lesbians and gay men both to raise public awareness of Law Reform issues, and to get hard evidence of public support for their position to sway members of Parliament in the final vote, was the creation of their own petitions. These petitions, organised separately in each city, often had two columns; if you signed in Column 1 it indicated you were, yourself, gay or lesbian. This meant, in theory, that organisers could point to the number of signatories who had nothing to gain from signing, that is, who would not be directly affected by a change in legislation. It also provided visible evidence of previously invisible homosexuals in a community. In practice, it also meant that a closeted

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Muldoon (the previous Prime Minister), both very conservative National members. *LIP 4* (1985) reports the feelings of two lesbians who appeared before the Committee. They were humiliated and belittled, and felt that Muldoon and Wellington especially were completely uninterested in them as individuals, asking questions only to score points.

person could maintain secrecy by signing in Column 2. As the resultant pages of the petition were to be published in local daily papers as an advertisement paid for by the signers and other (anonymous) donors, signing in Column 1 was tantamount to 'outing' oneself publicly.

There was much discussion on these issues in *LIP* 3. Although most contributors felt strongly that they wanted to have the opportunity to sign Column 1, they also felt that lesbians should not be pressured to 'come out' so dramatically. However, a long, thoughtful article by two lesbian academics particularly attacks lesbians in professional occupations who chose not to sign in Column 1. Answering each of the arguments that are commonly used against being so publicly 'out', the writers come to the conclusion that a refusal to sign in Column 1 boils down to pure selfishness. They point out the gains for all lesbians if all lesbians faced the world openly. Of course, this implies that women who have relationships with women are able to identify as lesbians, that their image of themselves counts that a key strand of their identity. Because of the hegemony of lesbian feminist ideas, which effectively defined the boundaries of what lesbian could be, there were certainly women whose preferred sexual activity was with other women, but who didn't see themselves in the picture entitled 'lesbian', or even 'gay'.

The issue of identity surfaces again in a report on a Lesbian/Gay Rights March in *LIP* 4 (1985). The report takes the form of a photo-essay, a medium that *LIP* adopted often and did well, interspersed with quotations from participants in a sophisticated and interesting layout. Lesbians did not march as a group, and some felt that to do so would have shown solidarity. Several of the same lesbians were annoyed that some heterosexuals marched

under a HUG banner – Heterosexuals Unafraid of Gays. This organisation was controversial among gay people; some appreciated the support, some felt that heterosexuals didn't need to identify themselves as 'different' from gays so blatantly. This seems to me to be an odd argument; if lesbians wish to march under a banner, should heterosexuals then be left to march with none? Should they be allowed under a lesbian banner? If heterosexuality, as an identity, is no more 'natural' than homosexuality, as argued in Chapters Two and Three, it should be able to be claimed, disdained, or celebrated in exactly the same way.

Except for some photographs of a rally held in Wellington in October 1985, there are no more reports of the Wilde Bill until *LIP 7* (May 1986), which carried the news that Part I, the reform of the laws regarding male homosexual behaviour, had passed its second reading of three, and looked set to become law. The report includes details of which Members voted for and against the Bill. Most importantly, it urges that letters be written encouraging Members, especially those who voted for Part I, to vote for Part II, which would have outlawed discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation over a wide range of daily activity. Sadly, this was not to happen, and Part II failed to pass its second reading. This meant that the New Zealand Parliament, in 1986, in effect said to lesbians and gay men: "You can do what you like legally, but we won't offer you any protection from those who irrationally hate what you do." As before, there is no mention in *LIP* of Part I of the Bill becoming law, which it did by just five votes; it is not mentioned again. Perhaps the collective was reflecting an understandably discouraged and disheartened mood of lesbians in the lack of success of their efforts to improve their own lives.

The lesbian newsletters' presentation of the issues around political alliances with gay men, and homosexual law reform in particular, revealed the narrowness of their view of what was of 'political' importance to lesbians. If readers had depended on the newsletters for information about the progress of the various Bills that the New Zealand Parliament considered in the 1970s and 1980s, they would have received a very incomplete picture. Although occasionally suggesting ways that individual lesbians might have personal input to the political process, the newsletters tended to concentrate on problems faced by individual lesbians who were unhappy with the attitude of the gay men involved.

#### Human Rights Legislation

The lack of legal protection for lesbians and gay men in New Zealand law was not a subject dealt with directly in the newsletters in the 1970s. As I have detailed in earlier chapters, from the newsletters one has the impression that lesbians felt they were operating from a position 'outside' society, and issues of citizenship and civil rights did not seem to be a high priority for the newsletter collectives. However, from around 1980, the movement to come under the umbrella of the Human Rights Commission developed as part of the homosexual law reform movement.

At first, the increase in lesbian and gay activity on this front had a dramatic effect. The then Human Rights Commissioner, Mr Pat Downey, made a statement which implied that the Commission was investigating extending the criminalisation of homosexual activity to cover lesbians. The climate of the times was not liberal; an editorial in a daily paper was of the opinion that "Homosexuality is one of a number of affronts to nature", and the "abberations" of its practitioners should not "be condoned" (reproduced in

*Circle 36*, 1981, p2). At that point

The lesbian community swung into action...we planned pickets, a queue-in, wrote pamphlets, harassed the Human Rights Office, talked to Downey, made press statements and generally tried to raise public consciousness about the issue (p2).

Sadly, the impetus was short-lived. After a few weeks, the actions

seemed to peter out because of divisions in the lesbian community about the best action to take, and why we were doing what we were doing. Talked out of action I'd guess you'd call it (p2).

This lack of focus seems to me to have been related to a lack of analysis of the issues involved. There were still deep divisions in the lesbian community about where and what the boundaries of that community were, and how much could be compromised to work with people who were not lesbians. This is the period when *Circle* was publishing the arguments about monogamy, marriage and lesbian lifestyles which I discussed in Chapter Five. It was becoming increasingly clear that the newsletter collectives could not claim to speak for all lesbian feminists, let alone all lesbians.

Such analysis was slow to begin. The next mention of Human Rights Legislation is in *LIP 1* (1985), in the lead-up to the campaign for the Wilde Bill. It is an informative article about the law as it then stood, with its lack of recognition of lesbians, and how the passing of Part II of the Wilde Bill might improve lesbians' daily lives. After the loss of Part II in 1986, the only mention of legislative rights is an article in *LIP 7* (1986), criticising the campaign of the then Minister of Justice for a Bill of Rights. The writer points out that the proposed Bill of Rights would have enshrined the rights of those who already had power, but not really aid the disempowered members of our society. She also points out that it would have had the effect of reinforcing the individualism of the Western liberal humanism,

without taking account of the 'different' culture of the Pacific. Comparing it to the Waitangi Tribunal, set up to hear Maori grievances by the Labour Government, she says that the Waitangi Tribunal can widen the way law is viewed in New Zealand, because it is not properly a Court and is not bound by the Rules of Evidence. The proposed Bill of Rights, on the other hand, she saw would have had the effect of further normalising the status quo as far as the law was concerned. The Bill of Rights proposal has long since died a political death, so it not clear, from this distance in time, how real her fears were. Certainly the Waitangi Tribunal, until the Bolger National Government's recent announcement of a final limit on Maori claims, seems to have been successful in settling several major Maori land claims and fishing rights disputes.

In 1989, the campaign to finally get legislative protection for lesbians, gay men and other sexual minorities again began to organise. *LIP 19* (1989) reports on the last, ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to get Human Rights legislation passed by the Labour Government, which was voted out of office in 1990. Although National Governments, in the recent past, had been much more conservative on social issues than Labour Governments, gay activists decided they were going to continue to push for equal human rights, in a social climate which was now very different from that of the early 1980s and the last National Government. A report in *LIP 19* indicates that the lesbians involved in the campaign were working in the same way as they had done in the 1985-7 Law Reform campaign. While working with gay men, they saw themselves as working for the lesbian community as well, with a separate lesbian coalition feeding into the main campaign.

Alongside the work for Human Rights, the Auckland gay and lesbian

communities were building up their welfare activities. *LIP 17* includes a report from the lesbian co-ordinator of the Auckland Gay-Lesbian Welfare Group, which, she says, is male-dominated. She acknowledges the diversity in the lesbian community, but pleads with lesbians to join this new venture, to increase solidarity and political strength in both communities. *LIP 19* has a notice of a meeting to set up the Auckland Gay Community and Health Centre, and *LIP 20* the formal announcement of the setting up of the Isherwood Trust, "to form a legal foundation for the establishing of a gay and lesbian health and community centre in Auckland" (p30). The outline of Trust is written by the two lesbian members, one of whom is the only Maori member of the Trust. They see the foundation as

a chance to influence the vision and eventual reality for the lesbian and gay health and community centre....it provides a concrete opportunity for lesbians and gay men to go beyond their stereotypes of each other and work together, as well as in separate groups (p30).

The report is accompanied by a copy of a letter sent to the trust by a local lesbian, which includes a plea for lesbians involvement. The writer hears gay men saying that "lesbians are using and draining the money and resources of the gay male community without giving anything back", and she also reports fears of a "lesbian 'takeover'" (p31).<sup>99</sup> On the other side, she acknowledges that gay male initiatives are seen as "likely to ignore or tokenise lesbian issues" (p31). She also sees that gay and lesbian Maori groups have a lot to give and to gain from this venture. *LIP 21* reports that the Trust now has 3 lesbian members (out of 8), and has employed a lesbian to "work on increasing the trust's profile in the lesbian community,

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<sup>99</sup> In my city, lesbians have had a structure for their own welfare support in place for some time, while gay men are only beginning to do this work. Gay men also frequently complain that lesbians are 'taking over' the local gay social club - because the women organise far more events than the men do. It has been part of the ethos of our club that it needed the men's greater spending power to survive; this is proving not to be the case.



and to help make the needs of lesbians known within the trust" (p46). The same issue has two reports on welfare work in Auckland, running gayline and lesbianline phone services and other less obvious welfare services, but it is not made clear how, or even if, these are part of the proposed Isherwood Trust.

The group formed nationwide to campaign for Human Rights legislation in 1989 was GLAD (Gays and Lesbians Against Discrimination). Inevitably, some lesbians formed their own groups, and in Wellington a group called LAVA (Lesbian Action for Visibility in Aotearoa) was formed. *LIP 20* (1989) details their views, and one aspect of their difference with GLAD was to prove divisive for the lesbian community in an unusually public way.

The draft Bill proposed outlawing discrimination on various grounds, one of which was "sexual orientation". GLAD wished to have the words "sexual orientation", as AIDS workers felt this was crucial. LAVA considered this too wide, and wished to have the phrase "Lesbians and Gay Men" substituted. They point out that "sexual orientation" could be used by heterosexual people who felt they were discriminated against by a gay or lesbian organisation, or because they were not gay or lesbian in a mainstream organisation.<sup>100</sup> They also feel that

by using the words "lesbians and gay men" the legislation would be stating specifically who we are rather than defining us by our sexual activity (p6).

This point is difficult to fathom: what does the phrase "lesbians and gay men" mean if it does not define people by their sexual activity? LAVA's limited notion of identity is also revealed in its statement that "Bisexuals

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<sup>100</sup> This is not far fetched; an Australian woman who was not selected for the national women's cricket team in 1994 claimed she had missed selection because she was not a lesbian.

are discriminated against because of the lesbian or gay component of their sexuality" (p4). This is clearly "defining people by their sexual activity", rather than by "who they are"! It goes against their earlier wish to have the legislation realise that to be gay or lesbian has, as Fuss (1990) says, political implications, whether we wish it to or not. In the clear-cut world of essentialist lesbian theory, it seems, to be bisexual means one will be eternally doomed to walk between worlds.

LAVA also saw itself as outside any necessity for gay men and lesbians to present a united front, and asserted their 'sovereignty' as lesbians. In their case, it almost amounted to the personal becoming the politically destructive, as they approached the Human Rights Commissioner with their rogue submission, unknown to the GLAD coalition partners. They claimed that because discrimination is practised against different groups in different ways, different groups might have different viewpoints about what legislation needs to do, thus each group should make its own submission. The concept of groups making joint submissions was anathema to them, because they alleged it perpetuated the power structures and inherent 'privilege' hierarchies of society, and maintained the very discrimination they wanted to fight.

The Human Rights legislation, introduced to Parliament by Richard Northey and with an amendment by Katherine O'Regan to cover people living with HIV/AIDS, was passed by Parliament in 1993 by 48 votes to 26, with around another 28 members abstaining or absent. It had been reported finally in *LIP 25* (Jan 1992), in the form of a reminder of the final date for submissions to the Select Committee. In fact, the last few issues of *LIP* (to *LIP 26* in June 1992) are virtually totally apolitical. They are made up of

scraps of separatist theory, short fiction, poetry, and book and film reviews which almost always relate the book concerned to essentialised notions of both gender and sexuality. It seem astounding that this should have been the case at a time when the legislation that has done the most to make lesbians legally visible in New Zealand is about to be passed. It emphasises yet again the small minority of lesbians who were served by these last issues of *LIP*.

The final assessment of the history of political coalitions between lesbians and gay men has not been attempted in this Chapter. What I have tried to do is to explain how the newsletters presented the issues, with some of the background to clarify the historical context.<sup>101</sup> There has been some writing about the campaigns for human rights and homosexual law reform in New Zealand, and I think that a political history of the various Bills, select committees and debates in the House would be interesting to consider alongside the mainstream press reports, the gay press and these newsletters. I have had to simplify and leave out large, interesting areas of information to keep my focus on how the debates were presented to lesbians in *Circle* and *LIP*, and on the evidence in the newsletters of divisions among lesbians on the issues. One significant event I have decided not to cover in detail is the 1989 National Gay and Lesbian Conference in Auckland, where gay men wanted to foreground the issue of AIDS and many lesbians wanted to talk about almost anything else. The contradictory reports of what ensued can be read in *LIP 20*. They illustrate the huge gulf in understanding and acceptance that can come about from the essentialising of identity issues, which has prevented some lesbians

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<sup>101</sup> Phil Parkinson's 1989 article in *Sites 19* is probably the best historical account. My information is from an unpublished paper by Pam Day, which contains some interesting background material to the debates.

seeing beyond narrow definitions to the possibilities of other connections.

The tendency of the New Zealand lesbian newsletters to focus on political issues that are directly related to the personal, at the exclusion of issues of wider social and national importance, is perhaps never better demonstrated than in *LIP's* attitude to the Human Rights Legislation. There is almost no in-depth reporting on the issues that the Bill was concerned with, or notices of upcoming meetings or action planned. Almost all reports were for meetings that had already been held. The debate on the wording of the Bill was presented as a debate between a view of identity which implied that sexuality was not, alone, a basis for identity, and an essentialist view which wanted to specify sexual behaviour as the sole basis for identity, and wanted to mark homosexual behaviour, as the mark of gay and lesbian identity, as deserving of special protection. Although gay men and lesbians were publicly working together in coalitions at the end of the 1980s, *LIP* was still attempting to present lesbian identity as being in opposition to society, and was even increasing its commitment to a separatism based on an essential, natural lesbian identity. Its commitment to increasing political awareness or encouraging political action among its readership was minimal.

#### Relations with mainstream feminism

In 1977 and 1978 issues (*Circles 26, 27 and 30*), views of public rifts between heterosexual feminists and lesbian feminists are reported. These accounts are of the 1977 United Women's Convention at Christchurch, and the split in the *Broadsheet* collective which resulted in a walkout by lesbian workers. As *Broadsheet* was, at the time, the only widely distributed written media for feminist women in New Zealand, the views expressed in

*Circle* are not available in any other written form.

The events at the 1977 United Women's Convention were the subject of reports in the national media, because a male reporter was asked to leave. When he seemed less than willing to go, he was 'removed' by one of the lesbians present. The varying reports of eyewitnesses in *Circle* dispute how much force was applied to him, but his revenge was rapid. The headline in the local paper that evening read: "Butch Spoils it for Majority" (*Christchurch Star*, June 7, 1977). Thus it was made to appear that only a small and easily discounted minority, those who rejected 'normal' femininity, wished to prevent men from attending the Conference, although, it implies, male reporters could have usefully increased public awareness of feminist issues. It also distanced the organisers from the actions of those who wished men to be kept away by focusing the blame on one 'queer' participant.

In fact, suspicion of the actions of the press was well founded. At the first Convention in Auckland, a newspaper had focused on a photograph of a small boy baby on his mother's lap, with text that suggested he would rather have been at the football with his father. The Wellington Convention had been held in the same building as a cat show, and another newspaper had made humorous comments on this chance concurrence. Naturally, many women were concerned about where the humour would be mined in Christchurch.

The United Women's Conventions were, basically, reformist, and also operated to an extent as social and networking opportunities for middle-

class women.<sup>102</sup> By 1977 it was becoming clear that an increasingly conservative organisation was tending to marginalise what they, and perhaps the majority of the New Zealand public, saw as the 'fringe' groups, such as lesbians and Marxist feminists. The organisers in Christchurch wanted media publicity for women's issues, and were prepared to compromise with the media to allow men to be present. Many women, not only lesbians, who felt oppressed by men in their daily lives, wanted the event to be reported by women. Although that faction were successful in having men banned from the Convention, the public relations victory was won by the more conservative organisers.

As a result of the unrest, lesbians were given a chance to address the Convention. The text of the speech is reported in *Circle 26*. It emphasises the connections between all women, and suggests heterosexual women should account for their own sexuality. Its tone is non-threatening, but it is not patronising, whining or pleading. However, *Circle* also reports a request from the organisers that the lesbian who spoke should be 'feminine', as the presence of more 'butchy' women was making some straight women uncomfortable.

The view of the lesbians writing in *Circle 26* is that the liberals attending the convention were seeing themselves as the 'real' women's movement, and lesbians as invaders, as a danger to public acceptance of feminism. Liberal feminists, they claim, were still working at the level of reform, and were not critical enough of society or its institutions. The United Women's

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<sup>102</sup> The Conventions ran in 1973 (Auckland), 1975 (Wellington), 1977 (Christchurch), and 1979 (Hamilton). It was not until Hamilton that one of the keynote speakers was openly lesbian (Charlotte Bunch), and even her presence was not universally welcomed by lesbians, as detailed in Chapter Five.

Conventions attracted thousands of women, so perhaps it was inevitable that they tended to espouse liberal, middle-of-the-road, non-threatening views. This had the effect of depicting lesbians as dangerous radicals, suspected of plotting to destroy what 'sensible' women were building.

Radical lesbian feminists reacted violently, thus 'proving' to liberals that they were, in fact, out to destroy everything that the reformers had achieved. A lengthy article in *Circle 26*, entitled "When is a Feminist not a Feminist?", sees the struggle in terms of a class issue, with the writer claiming that adherence to middle-class values was causing reformist feminists to harm both women's causes and the feminist movement. Included in the dangerously limited reformers is Marilyn Waring, at the time the only feminist in the conservative Muldoon administration, and an open lesbian. Waring was isolated in her party's caucus. It is very ironic that the only national lesbian publication of its day was not able to support her. Another writer, having given examples of the radical, destructive action of suffragettes and compared it unfavourably with the contemporary "reformist" feminism of New Zealand, even claims that the reason why women are not rushing to join feminism is that it is not radical enough.

Out of this debacle there is only one clear separatist voice. An article in *Circle 26* condemns the women at the Convention as being "male-identified", and claims that the writers are "Women-loving-women identified"; they are "lesbians [who] truly [sic] live our politics". This is the first serious mention I could find in the newsletters of Lesbian Nation as a viable concept in New Zealand:

I know...that we are, and in the past have been, better than men, and that we must revert back to ourselves for our own self-preservation and form a matriarchal women-loving-women identified society (p15)

This kind of essentialist separatism re-surfaces regularly in the newsletters over the following 15 years, actually reaching a peak in early 1990s, as I have mentioned earlier, in the later *LIPs*.

All of the rhetoric in *Circle* around the United Women's Conventions devolves on a view of lesbians as outside the norm, and as marginalised by the women's movement. Acknowledging that lesbians are seen by mainstream feminism as threatening, the newsletters encourages lesbians to capitalise on that position, and to refuse to co-operate with reformist movements. It reflects the view described by King (1986): lesbianism is seen as the 'natural' 'true' form of feminism, that all other feminist positions are weakened by co-operation with the very institutions in society that constitute the 'enemy'.

The accounts in *Circle* of the dramatic events in the *Broadsheet* collective also provide examples of the defensiveness that some lesbian feminists felt forced to adopt by mainstream feminism. These are reported in *Circle 30* (1978), the issue that includes a special celebration of *Circle's* first five years. This may not be coincidental; without lesbian input into *Broadsheet*, *Circle* would become the only outlet for lesbian feminist writing in New Zealand for a time.

Comments from *Circle* contributors provide evidence of a history of differences. They claim that *Broadsheet's* "middle-class heterosexist reformist feminism" (p74) was not radical enough, and that lesbians had been putting energy into *Broadsheet* for years, even though it didn't fairly represent lesbian women's lives. Most importantly, it was argued that the heterosexual members of the collective expected them to constantly



compromise on their political stance. The issue of sharing premises with the Women's Art Collective, as discussed in Chapter Five, had proved to be the final straw. The lesbians on the *Broadsheet* Collective would not 'sell out' other lesbians for the sake of *Broadsheet*.

The general feeling among members of the *Circle* Collective and other lesbians who contributed their views was that *Broadsheet* had let lesbians down. Certainly, 18 years into the future, I would have to agree that *Broadsheet* had always been very nervous about reporting both lesbian and socialist feminist issues, had in fact held to a conservative, reformist line, and had not widely fulfilled its claim to be New Zealand's feminist magazine in any widely representative sense.

In the pages of the newsletters, the 1977 United Women's Convention and the 1978 *Broadsheet* split seem to mark the beginning of a new period of isolationism. Some contributors now begin to refer to lesbian feminists as "Fem-les's" (*Circle* 32, p16 and many other places), presumably in an attempt to indicate difference from a lesbian feminism that they see as having 'sold out' to mainstream feminism, which has, in turn, 'sold out' to patriarchy.

As discussed in Chapter Five, there was especially angry opposition to Charlotte Bunch's views, expressed at the 1979 United Women's Convention. Contributors felt she was compromised by her position as a lesbian spokeswoman, and by her 'privilege' as a professional, relatively wealthy white woman. One writer objected to her trying to address both radicals and conservatives in the same speech, as the distance between the groups was too wide for them both to have taken Bunch's intended meaning the

same way. One claimed that Bunch's 'power' came from the contributions of other lesbians, and that she had misused it to gain 'privilege' in the heterosexual world. There were objections to Bunch's comment that lesbians should tolerate and respect straight women; one writer felt it was "like saying we should tolerate and respect men!" (*Circle* 32, p18).

The entire debate about Charlotte Bunch's contribution to the Convention was seen from such an essentialist perspective it is now somewhat hard to appreciate. The critics reported in the newsletters have very structuralist views about power and 'privilege', and little explicit understanding of the theory of rhetoric or of how 'meaning' is constituted. This is an example of the dangers that the most extreme advocates of politicising the personal can lead to: the personal grudge as the basis for political theorising.

In contrast, the same issue of *Circle* (1979) reports on a Seminar for Women held in Dunedin. All the women present listened to lesbians, as well as to socialists and representatives of various political parties, in small groups. This kind of respectful exchange of views in a tolerant atmosphere could well have been the norm in most parts of the country; it is not often reported in the pages of the newsletters.<sup>103</sup> The lesbians who spoke in Dunedin emphasised that being a lesbian has political implications, that it is not only a sexual preference, but that lesbian feminism is a total way of life that they did not see as 'alternative', but rather simply 'different'.

Other, less public clashes between lesbian and heterosexual feminists are reported in the newsletters. These include the refusal of some women at the

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<sup>103</sup> Information from Lynne Star indicates, for instance, that at that time in Hamilton, lesbian feminists maintained a respectful working relationship with gay men in *Gay Liberation*.

1985 Women's Studies Conference in Hamilton to support Homosexual Law Reform (*LIP 4*). On the other hand, a lesbian giving a speech on "The Women's Movement and Homosexual Law Reform" in 1985 to Socialist Action (*LIP 4*) was well received. She pointed out that some lesbians were feeling isolated in the Law Reform battle from some gay men, who saw it as their fight alone, and from feminists, who didn't see it as their fight at all. She points out that, as a human rights issue, 'it's everyone's fight'. To emphasise the relevance of the issue to her audience, she made connections between Homosexual Law Reform and rejection of the right-wing hegemony of the nuclear family.

In 1985, *LIP 2* published an article entitled "The Nuclear Threat: A Lesbian Perspective." Following a report from a woman at Greenham in the last *Circle* (43, 1984), it asks lesbians to consider the political implications of working for peace for the sake of future generations, rather than for their own future. This reflects discontent with the Greenham movement among some British lesbians, who felt that lesbian energy was being diverted from woman-centered concerns to fighting patriarchy in order to improve the world for children that lesbians weren't going to have.<sup>104</sup>

One of the major changes instituted by the new Labour Government in 1984 was the founding of a Ministry of Women's Affairs. *LIP 4* (1985) has the recommendations from a detailed submission sent to the new Minister, Ann Hercus. A group of lesbians took part in framing the 27-page document, and copies were made available for other lesbians to read and comment on. Ann Hercus's reply is also printed, and it is most positive and encouraging.

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<sup>104</sup> For a fictional presentation of these issues in Britain, see Anna Livia (1985).

She confirms that several of the recommendations have already become part of Ministry Policy.

In 1987, the Ministry agreed to meet with a group of lesbians for a consultation day. The organising committee immediately put an advertisement in *LIP 13*, calling for suggestions for subjects and matters that readers wanted raised. After the day had passed, there were three reports in *LIP 14* on what had transpired.

The first was a copy of the press release from the Ministry, sketching, as press releases do, only the barest outline of what had taken place. The second, from representatives of Mo Wahine Maori, affirmed the need for Maori lesbians to network, as they often find themselves more isolated than Pakeha lesbians. The last, and longest, was from two of the organisers. They explained how the lesbians who attended were chosen from occupations, racial groupings and backgrounds, and geographical locations as widely as possible. They also listed the issues that the Ministry had agreed to consider: next-of-kin issues, disabled lesbians, mental and physical health of lesbians, access to lesbian counselling, employment and housing issues, and getting sexual orientation included in the Human Rights legislation then being drafted. Discussion also covered greater visibility for lesbian issues in the Ministry's work and jobs set aside for lesbians within the Ministry. They conclude:

The Day seems to have been a great success: we were listened to; our proposals were noted, and hopefully progress will be made.

And so it was. Despite a small press furore about the Ministry being involved in special assistance for disabled lesbians, Mrs Hercus and the first Secretary of Women's Affairs, Mary O'Regan, maintained cordial

relations with those among the lesbian community who saw bureaucratic relations as important, and who formed a collective called the Wellington Lesbian Liaison Group with the Ministry of Women's Affairs. But times change, and so do personnel.

The next mention of the Ministry is an angry letter in *LIP 19* (1989), a copy of one sent to the new Minister, Margaret Shields. It accuses both herself and the newly appointed Chief Executive, "that dreadful Dr Judith Aitkins (sic) woman" (p13), of homophobia. The Minister had recently decided to "'postpone indefinitely' the short-term contract funding for researching lesbian issues" (p12). The Ministry is never again referred to in the pages of *LIP*.

The attitudes of newsletter contributors toward political alliances with heterosexual women reveal the defensiveness that marked much of the reporting of lesbians' relations with those outside the boundaries of what was allowed to be called lesbian. Contributors were often impatient with what they saw as the reformist attitudes of mainstream feminists, even those of feminists who were considered 'radical' in New Zealand society. Even issues that gained widespread acceptance and valorisation among feminists, such as peace issues, were not written about in the newsletters to any great extent. Although it is clear that many lesbians contributed greatly to debates and activities in mainstream feminism, the attitude to most feminist debates that were reported in the newsletters was dismissive. Feminist political activity was not endorsed as a useful activity for individual lesbians in the newsletters, because heterosexual feminists were never seen as 'radical' enough to fit an essentialised female identity, built on cultural feminist ideals of women as opposed to, and superior to, men.

### Racial Issues at home and abroad

The presentation of national and international issues around racism in *Circle* is almost non-existent, apart from occasional book reviews.<sup>105</sup> The collective, especially latterly, tended to Marxist-based class analysis of situations, interspersed with personal rhetoric. *LIP*, however, perhaps because of its Auckland base, often advertised events and demonstrations, such as an advertisement for an anniversary dinner for Bastion Point (*LIP* 16, 1988), or a local Maori Lesbian Hui (*LIP* 21, 1989). As I mentioned in passing in Chapter Five, the whole of *LIP* 18 (1988) was produced by Wahine mo nga Wahine o te Moana Nui a Kiwa, on the eve of the second national Maori Lesbian Hui, Hui Wahine mo nga Wahine. It contained an explanation of problems with conflicting meanings in translations of the Treaty, an issue which may not have been widely understood then. There are many poems, drawings, and photographs. Koori protests in Australia during their Bicentennial Celebrations had earlier been explained and connected to Maori sovereignty issues in *LIP* 15. This issue contains more information and two reports of the support that Mo Nga Wahine had given to Koori people on Australia Day – renamed by the Koori as Invasion Day. The article on Koha mentioned in Chapter Five is in this issue, as is a notice about upcoming changes to the education system, with information on how these key changes, which were eventually to lead to a completely re-organised education system in New Zealand, could be further investigated.

Acknowledgement of women of colour, other than Maori women, in the newsletters is very limited. *LIP* 3 (1985) has two short articles by a Samoan lesbian, revealing her loneliness and feeling of invisibility, and two others

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<sup>105</sup> For example, on *Finding a Voice*, a book about Asian women in Britain, and *This Bridge Called My Back* (both in *Circle* 38, 1981).

entitled "Women of Colour speak out". These are angry comments from three non-white, non-Maori women about racism and difference, claiming that New Zealanders, including New Zealand lesbians, can't deal with 'difference' that is any more complex than Maori or Pacific racial origins.<sup>106</sup>

In 1981, the New Zealand Rugby Union organised a tour by the South African Rugby team. This was a long-simmering issue in New Zealand, a country in which rugby football has long had icon status. The Tour saw violence between protestors and police at a level that most people had thought would not happen here. In the newsletters, the issue was taken up only in *Circle 38* (1981), with a reprinted article about women who are involved in the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa. Probably uniquely for *Circle*, the word 'lesbian' does not appear anywhere in this article.

The basis of the anti-apartheid movement, of course, is resistance to the concept of separate development. One correspondent found it necessary to distinguish between lesbian separatism and apartheid, on the grounds that separatism is freely chosen, and that, under apartheid, the opportunities for development are unequal.

Many correspondents from different cities reported difficult experiences with the protest movement in *Circle 38*. One lesbian felt she used as much energy fighting the male, middle-class leaders of the movement as she did demonstrating. She got very frustrated with what she saw as the movement's constant refusal to look at local issues of racism; she saw that

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<sup>106</sup> See also Jagose 1988b. This article shares the page with an advertisement for an upcoming visit by Audre Lorde.

members preferred to focus their analysis (and the energies) on another culture. Another went to a Wellington planning meeting to be told the organisers wanted to ensure there were "no gang members, punks, or queers" (p14) on demonstrations. Another lesbian commented on the lack of anger among demonstrators, and how she felt the demonstrations were specifically organised to damp down anger and be non-offensive. They all felt that the organisers seemed to be almost colluding with the police to avoid rogue demonstrations, and keep the image of the anti-apartheid movement respectable and middle-class. New Zealanders who were against the Tour were horrified at the violence they witnessed on their television screens, if not in person, at the demonstrations. It seems odd, now, to read that these lesbians, apparently, felt the demonstrations were not violent enough.

In 1986, *LIP* carried two reports of Waitangi day demonstrations. In *LIP 6*, four very angry Maori women berate the Government, the apathy of New Zealanders, and Maori leaders for failing to take Treaty issues seriously. They claim that these issues are more important than Homosexual Law Reform, or the French 'spy' scandal that was the main focus of national press attention at the time. Following this report is a notice from a new group of Pakeha women who want to learn more about Treaty Issues, and who want others to join them in their learning. It is frustrating that groups like this must have been meeting all the time, and sharing information, but they rarely shared their insights or analysis with the wider lesbian community through the pages of the newsletters.

*Lip 7* carries a report, almost uniquely from the South Island, about a rout of radical Pakeha & Maori from Christchurch Waitangi celebrations by local



Maori. It ends with a list of things the writer learned, which includes that stopping racism by Pakeha means more than just learning about it; Pakeha must be prepared to get out and fight, rather than just benefitting from the day off on Waitangi day. Although her argument was with a local Pakeha man, who considered himself the organiser of Waitangi day in Christchurch, clearly local Maori did not want the protestors disturbing their celebration. It is difficult, from the article and from this distance, to understand what the specific issues might have been for the local people.

There is virtually no serious attempt in the newsletters to discuss the issues involved in institutionalised racism in New Zealand, with two exceptions. One is the education programmes which were developed to tie in with the 1990 sesquicentennial celebrations, which were to mark 150 years of Pakeha settlement in New Zealand. The second was on the issue of funding for Maori Women's groups.

*LIPs 16 and 19* (1988) carry advance warning of planning for radical action for 1990. This was consolidated for many lesbians at the Christchurch Lesbian Conference in 1989, where there was an anti-racism presentation, reproduced in diagram form in *LIP 21*. It took the form of a drama with two women and two chairs, to explain the relative positions of Maori and Pakeha at various points in our history. It appears to have been a very well-thought-out presentation, but there is no indication in the newsletters how it was received.<sup>107</sup> It concluded with actual practical things, many of them not overtly political, but rather personal, that lesbians could do in the build-up to the Sesquicentennial celebrations, such as reading books that

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<sup>107</sup> Personal information from Lynne Alice indicates that it was well received and there was a general air of support for protest from the group present.

give the Maori viewpoint, and buying raffle tickets. The presentation included with excerpts from the 1990 Commission's leaflet on suggestions for celebrating 1990, which made an interesting counterpoint.<sup>108</sup> In the event, *LIP* was out of production for all of 1990, and the only coverage of 'alternative' events is a short photo essay on the Auckland protest march.

The question of funding for Maori groups working with Maori victims of violence came to a head early in 1985. When the Minister of Women's Affairs called for a Seminar on Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse funding, it was revealed Maori groups received far less funding than Pakeha groups.<sup>109</sup> The Minister refused to re-allocate funding, insisting that groups who wanted funding must be incorporated legally; many Maori groups were informally organised. Eventually, it was agreed that all money received by Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse support groups would be pooled, and redistributed informally, with half going to the Maori groups. This happened despite the Minister's threat that groups which did this would not be considered for further funding. An emotional report of the National Hui at which this issue was further discussed and the actual details decided is in *LIP 1* (1985).

A writer to *LIP 3*, who is involved with sexual abuse and rape healing work among Maori, comments on the implications of this decision for her work. She presents a concept that is basic to the way she works: The Whare o te Tangata (The House of the People). In an emotional, but clearly argued and

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<sup>108</sup> Some of the suggestions from the Commission reproduced here are so banal as to be insulting. For example: "'plant' the New Zealand flag in your local park using coloured flowers...bake a NZ shaped cake for a raffle" (p36).

<sup>109</sup> These events are detailed by Hinewirangi Kohu, *Broadsheet 128*, April 1985.

lucid appeal, she links rape of Maori women by Maori men to Pakeha rape of the land and the Maori race. She is involved in educating Maori women about health, and uses traditional Maori concepts of humanity's place in the universe as her basis. This is not only one of the most beautiful examples of prose in the entire twenty years of the newsletters I read, it is also convincing, logical and deeply rooted in material lives. It is a virtually unique example of inspiration, education and political 'nous', making a political issue personal for both Maori and Pakeha lesbians.

### Summary

In this chapter I have reflected on the reporting of the few events that were presented in the newsletters as being of national importance to lesbians. These occasions highlighted for newsletter readers a few issues that arose when some lesbians acted in concert with or in opposition to actions taken by other groups in society. They were occasions when issues of identity became crucial for lesbians doing coalition work, and, as can be seen by the experience of LAVA and GLAD, a typically essentialised lesbian identity sometimes proved to be too rigid a concept for compromise to be possible. Some of the issues I chose not to cover in depth were the Women's Forums that the new Ministry of Women's Affairs organised nationwide in 1986, economic and legal issues, environment and peace issues, and issues about lesbian rights in other countries.<sup>110</sup>

There is a clear movement over time discernable in the newsletter reports concerning coalition work, especially with gay men. As has been discussed, some lesbians had trouble co-operating even with other lesbians over the

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<sup>110</sup> Most of these issues tended to be reported briefly, and not debated. Much of the material was reproduced from overseas publications.

issue of the Human Rights Commissioner in 1981. But, despite the hiccup created by some lesbians' rejection of gay men's and bisexuals' concerns at the 1989 Gay and Lesbian Rights Conference, the 1990s have seen much more networking between lesbians and gay men in New Zealand. This may be partly due to lesbians becoming less concerned with rigid ideas about 'correctness' and boundaries, and developing more useful understandings of how coalitions can work. The rise in the profile of lesbian domestic violence in the last few issues of *LIP*, discussed in the previous chapter, is another indication that the most extreme essentialisms are being questioned, although it has to be set alongside the concurrent rise in articles which espoused a very negative form of separatism.

The concluding chapter will review my arguments and the evidence I have used to support them, and will draw some conclusions about the project in its entirety.

## Chapter Seven:

### **Policing the Boundaries: summary and conclusion**

#### Introduction

In this chapter I will first review my project briefly, then the building blocks of the argument in each chapter. I will conclude with a discussion of the themes that I saw arising from my reading of the newsletters, and the implications they had for the visible lesbian feminist communities in New Zealand from the early 1970s to the early 1990s.

When I began this project I had only a vague idea of the origins of lesbian identity in New Zealand. When I first encountered a lesbian community in 1987, its members had developed a fairly clear idea of what they thought a "lesbian" was: a woman who gave all her emotional energy to herself and to other women, and none to men. As I had two boy children this idea did not appeal to me. I also found the absence of any acknowledgement of the importance of sexual expression in lesbians' lives puzzling. This project has clarified for me the ideas about identity that have shaped the development of some forms of lesbian feminism in New Zealand, and has made me much more confident to assess the usefulness or otherwise of these ideas.

### My argument so far

New Zealand has had a strong history of lesbian feminism. Although lacking any long-lived feminist presses, there has been a vigorous history of newsletter publication, probably due to a relative lack of public venues for lesbian to socialise in most of the cities and towns. The pages of these newsletters preserve the debates and theorising that both defined a form of lesbian feminism and sparked discussion about it for their readers. In this thesis I have presented a close reading of *Lesbian Feminist Circle* (1973–84) and *Lesbians in Print* (1985–92), the nationally-distributed newsletters. I regret that I was not able to continue the work to include *Wellington Lesbians Newsletter* (1985– ) or *Tamaki Makaurau Lesbian Newsletter* (1992– ), as these would have widened the debates, and brought the information up to the present time. It is impossible to know how many women read *Circle* or *LIP*, or to know, more than in a few instances, how they felt about what they read. It seems certain that the extreme views that often appeared were those of a tiny minority, but as I have not used any other methods of research I cannot assess their impact. This study is limited to the concept of identity as it was revealed in the newsletters.

Theorising about identity has been the backbone of this project. In Chapter Two I discussed the implications of the persistence of feminist theorising dating from the 1970s, and compared it with some recent post-structuralist thinking. As I read and reflected on the history of ideas about 'identity' I was struck with the lack of interest in radical re-visionings of this basic concept in New Zealand until the 1990s. Feminist theorising, which seemed to present such a radical challenge to New Zealand society in the 1970s, was often very close to a desire to return to the nineteenth century notions of women as 'pure', 'civilising', and generally responsible for the

moral health of the nation. As a result, feminists presented themselves with an ideal that was every bit as impossible as their traditional role in the nuclear family had been: to force the male-dominated society to become more 'humanised'.

For the lesbian feminists who wrote for the newsletters, the concept of 'identity' carried an even greater burden. Not only did they feel they had to identify themselves as different from men, they also wanted to differentiate themselves from heterosexual and bisexual women. The way they did this was, on the whole, to take the most essentialised ideas about femaleness as the attributes of 'real women', of women who had been least affected by the dominant (male-based) culture – that is, of lesbians. On this unquestioned superiority of 'real female' over 'male' was built the rejection of the institutions of society and the valorizations of cultural feminist ideals and actions. I will expand on this theme later in this chapter.

The theorising about identity from later feminists and queer theorists, such as Fuss, Sedgwick and Alice, has raised the possibility of the destabilising not only of 'identity', but of the concept that much lesbian theorising has fairly uncritically depended on: that of 'community'. Out of the idea of a community of 'like-minded' individuals comes the powerful concept of 'lesbian identity politics'. Originally theorised by the Combahee River Collective as part of the Radicalesbians' 1974 challenge to the homophobia of United States National Organisation of Women, it became, and still is, a basic tenet of much lesbian feminist thinking. Despite the fact that the Combahee women claimed an identity that was based on both race and gender difference, lesbians claimed the notion of 'lesbian identity politics' as basic to all lesbian theorising. Unfortunately, the 'identity' it was based in was

inadequately theorised. It claimed a lesbian identity as different from heterosexual identity, but as unified within itself. It created boundaries and limits and became, ultimately, oppressive to the lesbians who claimed it.

For the stability of communities, it has often been believed that 'sameness' must be emphasised and 'differences' played down. This has certainly been true of many lesbian feminist communities, with the result that these communities have tried to appear largely homogeneous. Some of the implications of this are discussed below. However, homogeneity in some lesbian feminist communities has been bought at a price: individuals have been marginalised or ignored, and political alliances have been made difficult or impossible by boundaries to 'acceptable' behaviour erected as a result of lesbian feminist beliefs. In Chapter Three I looked at the implications for the lives of those lesbians who placed and accepted these boundaries. These implications included a sense of separateness from and superiority over other groups in society, which led to isolation and an increasing difficulty with becoming politically effective. It also created a group of social problems which were believed to be caused by an individual's lack of adjustment to her 'true' female nature, and to an undue emphasis on the 'correct' lesbian style. I finished Chapter Three by discussing some of the implications of basing communities on deconstructed ideas about identity. This might allow for the development of an identity politics based on difference, change and commonality rather than on unity and the silencing of dissension.

In the second part of this thesis, from Chapters Four to Six, I traced the actual development of these events through the newsletters. In Chapter Four I followed the reporting of the development of lesbian identity politics



in New Zealand. From early expressions of solidarity with gay and bisexual women, several key moves had led the newsletters to claim for their theorising a separatist, hierarchised, dominant position by 1980. Lesbians were encouraged to see 'coming out' as having finally discovered the essential truth about themselves, and to use that 'truth' to help build better communities for other lesbians. That the roots of that identity may have been based in a simplistic notion of gender was not seen as problematic, nor was it often acknowledged in the newsletters that there were many lesbians in New Zealand, perhaps even the majority, who did not define themselves in these essentialised ways, or in opposition to the dominant culture.

Writers to the newsletters, and sometimes other lesbian feminists, used the concept of privilege as a way to minimise the effects of 'difference' in lesbian communities. It was a key to the way many lesbian feminists theorised both their identity as lesbians and the way their communities worked. Based on an unquestioned hierarchy, it proved to be an effective weapon to silence informed dissent. When occasional criticism of what was claimed as 'the lesbian feminist position' was made by lesbians who were clearly 'underprivileged', it would be sidelined as 'male-identified'. This was a sign of an opinion that was not 'properly' developed.

The hegemonic nature of lesbian feminism in New Zealand has been discussed by Alice (forthcoming 1996), and in the United States context by Phelan (1989). They both describe how the essentialised notions of gender that underpin cultural feminism came to define and dominate lesbian feminist theorising, and how they marginalised other lesbian viewpoints. In Chapter Five I discussed how, in the newsletters, the operation of the

phrase 'the personal is the political' became a way to focus lesbians' attention on tiny aspects of their daily lives, rather than to widen their understanding of how identities might work in communities. The most intimate details of lesbians' personal relationships became imbued with political significance: there were even approved ways to make love. Aspects of personal lives that were seen as divisive or destructive to lesbian communities or to other lesbians were reduced to 'personal problems'. These included the 'male-identified' fault of acting violently, which was not publicly acknowledged in the newsletters as a social problem for the lesbian community in the newsletters until the late 1980s, and also addictions to alcohol or drugs.

In Chapter Six I looked at how some political events in New Zealand were personalised for readers of the newsletters. As I have already suggested, the reduction of the 'political' to the 'personal' proved a handicap to some lesbian feminists when they wanted to form alliances with gay men and heterosexual feminists. Although these alliances are never easy, the essentialised hierarchy that formed the basis of much lesbian feminist theorising made their early efforts nearly impossible. When the newsletters reported political work undertaken with gay men, they continually emphasised the stand taken by lesbians, rather than the effectiveness of the action in bringing about change. Lesbians who were active against the Springbok Tour in 1981 reported encountering homophobia and racism from the campaign organisers. There are no reports in the newsletters of successful political action being undertaken with heterosexual feminists, except for a short period of co-operation between a lesbian coalition and the first Minister of Women's Affairs and her staff. Those lesbians who were involved in successful coalitions with heterosexual feminists or gay men, or

working in the Trade Union movement or other aspects of the mainstream political scene in New Zealand, were either ignored in the newsletters, or were spurned as being 'reformist'.

#### Themes from my reading

There are several themes that emerge for me from my reading of the New Zealand lesbian newsletters. The first is the virtually unquestioned acceptance of simplistic and rigid ideas about gender that arise from what Alice (forthcoming 1996) calls "essentialising moves", a concept I outlined in my first chapter. These moves involve understandings of identity that claim to be based in an understanding of social constructionism actually slipping into essentialist explanations. An analysis of when and how this happens often reveals gaps in apparently seamless explanations that underpin claims to identity. The hegemony of these ideas about gender that were part of much lesbian-feminist theorising led to a rejection of New Zealand society as male-dominated, and therefore woman-hating and especially lesbian-hating in the newsletters. The theme of lesbians as outlaws is a regularly recurring one. There is a frequently a depth of commitment expressed to 'lesbian culture'; what this culture might actually be, however, is defined very loosely. The fervour of some newsletter contributions has led me to compare extremes of belief in lesbian culture and ethics with extremes of religious belief in the wider society.

In another "essentialising move" traced in the newsletters, a hierarchy of 'privilege' has been developed, which more or less mirrors how some lesbian feminists see the operation of privilege in wider New Zealand society. In the lesbian feminist version, an increase in one's privilege means taking more responsibility for lesbians who are less privileged. This calls into question

the roles of agency and advocacy within the lesbian community. While the hierarchy of privilege implicitly recognises the difference that is claimed by Maori women and other women of colour in New Zealand, there is a lack of lesbian theorising in the newsletters on racial issues. Finally, the theme of boundaries to what can be called 'lesbian' have been a major feature, usually expressed in the phrase 'politically correct'.

#### "Essentialising moves" in lesbian feminism

In the light of current theorising about identity, the fixedness and rigidity of the ideas about 'gender' that underpin much of the writing in the newsletters become clear. While the conscious adoption of essentialist thinking may have its uses, as Fuss (1990) explains, the kind of theorising that newsletter contributors engaged in is generally based on two simple equations: 'real' women are good: warm, nurturing, motivated by love and desire for peace; 'real' men are bad: rapine, violent, motivated by hate, lust and their own egos.

The dependence on these two maxims led some lesbians to see themselves as outside the 'man-made' society in which they were living. While not actually espousing a completely separatist lifestyle, they centralised separatist ideals and attempted to 'normalise' their own lifestyle choices. They frequently reported seeing themselves in the social vanguard, as outlaws with a social conscience. Like Robin Hood, they lived on the edge, never able to gain acceptance for their desires and choices, but motivated by a mixture of survival and a desire to improve the lives of all lesbians. But, although much lip-service was given to the idea of building strong lesbian feminist communities, there is not a lot of detail in the newsletters about how this was done. A letter from a long-term lesbian visitor from the United States

in *Circle 27* (1977) offers the observation that lesbians here are more fragmented than they are in the States, with, she suggests, insufficient energy being put into conflict resolution within what they claim as their community.

Theories of identity and their importance to the nature of communities has traditionally stressed an emphasis on identity as unitary, and a conception of the strength of a community being in its singularity. Slogans traditional to understanding political activism such as "Unity is strength", "Divide and Conquer", and "Don't let the side down" are built on an assumption of the suppression of difference in a greater cause. These assumptions, in turn, are based on ideas about the essential natures of particular groups, for example on the solidarity of the working class, the perfidious nature of capitalists, or the peaceful nature of women. Deconstructed ideas about identity and unity, such as those of Fuss and Alice, have shown that identity may be neither fixed, stable nor dependable, that it may, in fact, actually be based in difference. This leads to the possibility that communities can be recognised as being based on interest and political expediency, rather than on stable, eternal verities.

The nature of these communities may be ephemeral, far from the 'safe', 'stable' notion of 'home' that has been traditionally associated with the idea of 'community' (Phelan, 1993). But they may prove to be of more use to a wider range of individuals if the idea of barriers and boundaries based on outdated essentialist notions are eschewed in favour of temporary alliances based on commonality of interest and political advantage.

There are signs that alliances of this kind are becoming better understood

and accepted in New Zealand. Certainly the final, successful campaign to pass the Human Rights legislation in the early 1990s showed signs of lesbians' success at political coalitional work. One lesbian, active in lesbian feminism since the mid-1970s, said to me recently that she felt it was the end of lesbian feminism when lesbian activists started working for homosexual law reform in the early 1980s, and in a sense it was. It was at least the beginning of the end of a community attempting to base itself in certainty and in rejection of and opposition to the norms of the wider society. It was the end of a community that claimed to strive for 'purity' and expected its members to work toward a pre-defined 'ideal self'. The campaigns for homosexual law reform and human rights for gay men and lesbians drew in many lesbians who had been ignored, silenced or alienated by the hegemonic nature that much lesbian feminism had developed, and made the actual diversity of lesbians visible in a way that had not been possible since the early years of gay liberation.

#### Seeing the personal as 'the' political

Bringing matters of personal relationships into the political arena was an important and necessary part of the 1970s feminist enterprise. However, there are subtleties involved in the difference between 'the personal is political' and 'the personal is the political' that eluded some lesbian feminists.

At first, the examination of how matters of power affected personal relationships revealed how the institutional power that men held over women was reflected in their personal dealings as well. Through consciousness-raising groups, women came to understand the workings of power imbalances in their daily lives, and, sometimes, were able to discover

and show each other ways these balances could be righted or improved. The pain that women felt in their personal lives could become a means of inspiring them to political action, and the alleviation of that pain could become, and still is, an important form of political activism for women who work in Rape Crisis and Sexual Assault survivors' groups.

However, for some lesbian feminists, the political began and ended with the personal. They became almost obsessed with the minutiae of everyday life and the political implications of every personal action on themselves and other lesbians. As these were generally the women who rejected New Zealand culture as male-dominated and women-hating, for these lesbians 'the political' shrank to become only 'the personal'. As in some forms of religion, every action that was taken had to be examined for its purity of intent; it might have unseen future consequences for the actor and/or for other women she was responsible for.

I have made several references in earlier chapters to the almost 'religious' fervour in the newsletters over the years. 'Coming out' often carries a connotation of 'conversion'; the new lesbian has finally 'seen the light'. Those with more 'privilege' are expected to take responsibility for other lesbians, in much the same way as liberal wealthy Christians are expected to express the virtue of charity. The concept of 'privilege' itself is, as Jones and Guy (1992) point out, a 'moralising' one. The idea of a morally or politically 'correct' way to behave is inherently tied to the idea of a transcendent good or god, against which or whose strictures human endeavour is to be measured.

In lesbian feminism, one transcendent good was 'political correctness',

adherence to which would, it seemed, eventually produce the kind of lesbian community that could meet all the needs of its members equally. While it may be that no lesbian feminist actually believed that such a community was humanly possible, it was seen in the newsletters as a goal to work toward. The newsletters clearly and frequently refer to improvement, on the part of individuals, in their struggle to become better lesbians, and corresponding soul-searching as to the 'right' way to behave. They rarely, if ever, interrogate the assumptions that underlie these efforts.

### Privilege

In the newsletters, particularly those of the mid 1970s, lesbians continually report that, in the society around them, they see increasing power and privilege leading to increasing selfishness and abdication of personal responsibility. They did not wish to display these failings in their dealings with each other, so they theorised a hierarchy of privilege which indicated that an increase in privilege carried with it a concomitant increase in responsibility to one's fellow lesbians. Once again, what actually constituted 'power' and 'privilege', and who was really 'underprivileged', were undertheorised and presented as appearing on a scale based on essentialised notions about race, class, gender and sexuality. This scale purported to ensure that difference was 'fixed' – those with more 'privilege' had the responsibility to ensure that there would be some kind of levelling out of inequalities. In fact, difference became 'fixed' in the sense that it theorised structural inequalities as solidly set in place.

It was not made clear, however, how the equalising responsibility was to be carried out. Were 'wealthy' lesbians supposed to give money to poor



lesbians? Were lesbians who owned houses supposed to take in homeless lesbians? What often happened was that a vague sense of guilt attached itself to lesbians who had 'privilege', but who could never fulfil their unspoken obligations to 'the lesbian community'. This was the kind of debate that could have been useful to lesbians reading the newsletters, but which was never attempted.

### Boundaries

The theme of the erection of boundaries around lesbians and their culture is probably the most enduring impression these newsletters have left on me. Although this theme was not present in the earliest newsletters, it quickly became apparent that some lesbians saw themselves as existing virtually outside society. Often cast as deviant and pathologised in the press, when they were allowed to appear at all, they took those characteristics as markers of a special status and developed an identity for themselves which, very often, simply revalued essentialised patriarchal views of femaleness. They were not alone in their rejection of capitalism, patriarchy, and the nuclear family, but they may have used opposition as the basis of their identity more, and for a longer period of time, than other groups did. As I have said above, these boundaries now seem to be less important. Perhaps this reflects a sense that even fewer lesbians feel the need to continually defend an identity that both formed and was formed by a state of siege.

### Final points

The picture of lesbian feminism in the 1970s and early 1980s that emerges from my reading of the New Zealand lesbian newsletters is one of isolation, of an idea of community based on a limited, essentialised notion of identity,

and in which dissension was not encouraged or welcomed. Clearly, this is a partial picture of the complexities of real lesbian feminist communities. There is also signs of a small strand of lesbian feminism which, against the main trends of lesbian and mainstream feminism, moved into an even more essentialised position by the end of the 1980s, and developed a strongly separatist position. However, the main trend among lesbians writing since the mid 1980s has been toward a less bounded approach to their community. Although my reading finished in 1992, it is clear from the later newsletters that younger lesbians were changing ideas that there is a 'correct' style, and lesbians who were marginalised by the most limiting moves within lesbian feminism are now moving back into contact with lesbian feminists. The boundaries that were erected around the word 'lesbian' are becoming more fluid, while many lesbians are finding that they can make useful political alliances with other groups, such as gay men, without necessarily compromising their own sense of identity. Perhaps this indicates that 'identity' is becoming less bound to rigid ideas about gender, and more concerned with possibilities of connection among those with differing experiences and viewpoints. No doubt there would be some lesbian feminists who would see these shifts as indicative of a de-radicalizing of the lesbian position, and these views could be discerned in the trend to separatism in the last *LIPs*. However, a radicalism that has no impact on the surrounding social fabric seems to me to be using energy toward no end, and an identity which strives for unity and which privileges one oppressed facet of itself to do this will never be as complete as it imagines itself to be. Lesbian integrity should not have to depend on an appeal to a biologically-based essentialism, when it could be more usefully reside in an unstable, open ended connectivity.

This study only begins to look at some of the visible traces left by New Zealand lesbian feminists over the last twenty-five years. I am confident that it traces a particular minority viewpoint in New Zealand feminism through its development in a way that has not been possible before. However, there is much more work to be done in researching both the histories of earlier lesbian lives in New Zealand, and the current lives of lesbians, particularly those who have never considered themselves part of lesbian feminism. As there is little written evidence of lesbian lives, much of this work would probably involve oral histories.

I have been aware all through my work on this study that what I have been reading has been written by only a few lesbians, and read by only a few hundred, perhaps more than a thousand, at any time. However, it was the only regular contact that many lesbians had with any visible lesbian culture, and so the history revealed by the lesbian newsletters is a vitally important factor in the history of lesbian and feminist activism in New Zealand.

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2. Newsletters

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