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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
Massey University

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November 1995

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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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