

“That Women Could Matter”: Building Lesbian Feminism in California, 1955-1982

By

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*Dedicated to Millie and Ernie Taylor, and to Gaby,
who continue to be my home though they are now gone,
and to the many women, past and present, who inspired this work.*

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Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Abstract	xiv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 – Daughters of Bilitis	52
Chapter 2 – Gay Women’s Liberation and the Creation of Lesbian Feminism.....	102
Chapter 3 – Women’s Bookstores as Lesbian Nation	158
Chapter 4 – Olivia Records and Questioning (Lesbian) Feminist Futures	218
Conclusion	268
Bibliography	279

Abstract

of

“That Women Could Matter”: Building Lesbian Feminism in California, 1955-1982

This project excavates a world of lesbian feminist activity that functioned as a distinct social movement while also contributing the broader women’s movement through shared goals of feminist liberation. Tracing the activism of San Francisco Bay Area lesbians exposes a vibrant site of movement-building. Beginning in 1969 and running into the early 1980s, lesbian feminists organized for revolution from the position that separating from men and male systems of power was the key to ending patriarchal oppression. Their activity grew out of the lesbian activism in the homophile movement of the 1950s and 1960s, when most activist lesbians opted to organize separately from gay men. During three distinct movement phases, lesbian feminists redefined women’s sexuality, built a far-reaching network known as Lesbian Nation, and pushed (straight) feminism to grapple with barriers to movement longevity. The Daughters of Bilitis, while not explicitly feminist identified, laid a foundation of separatist organizing from which lesbian feminism emerged. Gay Women’s Liberation defined a new public lesbian identity that emphasized prioritizing women above else, relying upon its multiclass and multiracial composition to craft their radical grassroots vision. Women’s bookstores demonstrated that lesbian separatism did not mean disengagement from (straight) feminism. Bookstores functioned as intimate sites of Lesbian Nation and reflected the woman-identified belief that women need not engage with the state to create revolution. Olivia Records emerged out of the movement’s national network and spread the vision of woman-identification to its furthest possible reaches.

As a site of debate for feminist values at the end of the seventies, the record label exposed how (straight) women continued to challenge the legitimacy of lesbians as feminist actors even as lesbians proved central to movement survival. Together, these entities shaped San Francisco Bay Area lesbian feminism, supported the region's thriving women's community, and served as a vital hub of a national lesbian movement that constructed a public lesbianism upon which contemporary queer women continue to build.

Introduction

One lesbian sister described Alice Molloy as “small” with a “New York Rattle,” carrying an “open heart” disguised “under a layer of slightly bitter wit.”¹ Another found her “grumpy and frightening in her big horn-rimmed glasses.”² Late in the afternoon on February 7, 1970, a third woman observed her to be a “young woman, jeans-and-sweater clad” with “the unaggressive poise of one who knows herself.”³ At this moment she sat on a panel titled “The Lesbian in the Liberation Movement” at the Second Bay Area Women’s Coalition Conference. Beside her were Pat Davis from the Daughters of Bilitis and an unnamed woman from NOVA, both lesbian organizations with long histories in San Francisco.⁴ Molloy spoke as representative of Gay Women’s Liberation. The panel functioned as this organization’s introduction to the Bay Area women’s community. In this moment she was her most “determined and intriguing,” deciding to enact a cheeky experiment her co-panelists had warned her against as they took the stage.⁵ She looked out to the audience and asked, “Will any of you who have ever felt sexually attracted to

¹ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution: The Making of an Activist Poet* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 118.

² Janice Gould, e-mail message to author, July 30, 2015.

³ Jess K. Lane, “Bay Area Women’s Coalition Conference,” *The Ladder* 14, no. 7/8 (April/May 1970): 4.

⁴ The Daughters of Bilitis was the first lesbian rights organization in the country. It formed in San Francisco in 1955 then developed chapters nation-wide. While the national body dissolved in 1970, its publication continued into 1972 and many chapters existed through the 1970s and even into the 1980s. NOVA was an offshoot of Daughters, formed by those members who did not want to participate in public and political activities. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman*, 20th anniversary ed. (Volcano, CA: Volcano Press, 1991), 263-264.

⁵ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 118.

women please stand up?”⁶ A sort of stunned silence was followed first by a small number of out lesbians who did not hesitate to rise. Others slowly took to their feet. Then, in what appeared to one participant as the “dam bursting,” at least three quarters of the “three hundred women from forty-four organizations” were on their feet.⁷

The panel spoke volumes about this moment in time, the long history that made it possible, and the events of the coming years. The city by the bay gave rise to lesbian activists who laid the very foundation from which lesbian feminism emerged.⁸ The Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) took shape in 1955 when a group of San Francisco women came together in search of a social alternative to gay bars. Inside of a year the group added to its purpose the social advancement and political advocacy of lesbian rights. Those who only wanted to come together privately and feared some of the more public activities of DOB split from their sisters and created NOVA. The spirit of DOB, that lesbians had the right to organize on their own terms, served as a significant example to the women who shaped a separate lesbian feminist movement. Struggling to navigate between the sexism of their gay brothers, the homophobia of their straight sisters, and a host of other movements that demonstrated both, lesbian feminists followed the path of DOB.⁹ Around the country new groups with innovative politics emerged with the goal of prioritizing the lesbian experience. Collectively, these groups formed a movement that functioned both alongside and against the women’s movement. In the Bay Area this began in

⁶ Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman*, 263-264.

⁷ Elsa Gidlow, “Sisters Take a Stand,” *Women: A Journal of Liberation* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1970):41; Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman*, 264.

⁸ I discuss the reasons for a study focused on the San Francisco Bay Area later in this introduction as well as in in chapters 1 and 2.

⁹ Early lesbian feminists often had activist experience in other movements and brought those insights into their work. In addition to the women’s and gay movements, women of this project came out of civil rights, labor, indigenous rights, student, anti-war, and environmental movements.

November 1969 when Molloy and a handful of others envisioned their own space in the world of identity politics and began to speak of gay women's liberation.

What DOB began Gay Women's Liberation (GWL) shaped into a movement, yet it scarcely did so alone. It was the first of countless endeavors to appear in the Bay Area and around the country. During the height of lesbian feminism, roughly from 1969 to 1982, women found myriad ways to build community, advance politics, and create culture. I focus on those women who chose to organize within separatist lesbian-identified collectives but who continued to see their goals as tightly bound with the women's movement.¹⁰ As lesbian feminist ideology began to spread through local communities it manifested in sundry ways. The groups that built it into a distinct movement sought to support women in need, mobilize political activists, and celebrate women's lives through the creation of issues organizations, women's centers, housing collectives, health clinics, bookstores, cafes, credit unions, presses, record labels, and more. Women from around the country joined them in this work. At the same time that GWL began penning manifestos on the meaning of lesbianism New York women embarked upon the same journey. Soon lesbians in Iowa City, Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and others were similarly engaged in this activity too. Together, these activists redefined lesbianism and through it the capacity of women's (sexual) relationships to sit at the center of revolution. With time they created a national lesbian feminist network that operated independently of the women's movement while still asserting the legitimacy of their feminist belonging.

In this project I explore the stories of lesbian feminist collectives that typify three distinct phases of the movement. In the first, from 1969-1973, lesbians claimed the authority to define

¹⁰ There were those feminist identified lesbians who made their activism home in other movements and those who rejected their straight feminist sisters. As I conducted my research it became clear that those groups that proved particularly influential and productive were those that saw their politics as best served by situating their work as part of larger world of women's community.

their sexuality on their own terms and the right to organize around the dual nature of their oppression. GWL awoke this spirit in the Bay Area through an intersectional collaboration. Its founding moments were a first in the United States. By 1973 well-formed local communities understood lesbian feminism as something that united women around the country. Personal networks, grassroots periodicals, and movement conferences created a national network that linked local sites of activity. The growth of lesbian feminism empowered activists to see themselves as a distinct force with great potential. At the same time, this growth exposed the countless, often conflicting, interests at play in the young movement. From 1973 to 1977 lesbians pursued “project activism” that allowed them to enact their politics in ways most meaningful to them and their communities while accommodating the movement’s disparate ambitions. Collectively, this activism composed the growth of Lesbian Nation, a world of woman-identified institutions intended to bring about revolutionary societal change. While visions of such change varied, it commonly included the desire to see a world free from systems of gender and sexuality that restricted the ways women could live their lives. Women’s bookstores well reflected this period in the Bay Area. Towards the end of the decade a number of changes and conflicts complicated Lesbian Nation. In this third phase, beginning in 1977 and ending in 1982, lesbians increasingly found themselves questioning feminist futures. They strove to cope with a changing political and economic landscape, internal conflicts, and debates over long term structures of the women’s movement. Olivia Records, which relocated to the Bay Area at the start of this period, found itself at the center of these debates. These disputes revealed the successes and limitations of lesbian feminisms first decade of activity.

This is a study of lesbian feminism as a social movement – a local story situated in national context. The lesbian feminism of the San Francisco Bay Area was a product of its

environment and I detail here institutions that were critical in developing the movement locally. And yet as the pioneering site of lesbian feminist activism, San Francisco played a unique role in growing and supporting the movement nationally, too. The women of this study also demonstrate the paucity of information on west coast feminisms in general. While we speak so frequently about the coastal biases within the histories of gender and sexuality, this study demonstrates how much work remains to be done in excavating the feminist narratives of California women. Looking to California disrupts the singular origin story of lesbian feminism emerging in New York.¹¹ Adding western voices to our understandings of this movement cannot help but alter its meaning. As such, I use this local study to propose a new framework that sees lesbian feminism as a distinct, national social movement. I began by asking, what would a social movement history look like with lesbians placed at the center? In histories of the gay rights movement and the women's movement lesbians largely function as afterthought or foil. While lesbian voices are beginning to appear with greater frequency in the histories of gender and sexuality, lesbian feminism remains largely unstudied.¹² I enter into this conversation to question these silences. Through the voices of California lesbians I hear tell of a social movement that sought to radically transform all women's lives and through them society as a whole.

Lesbian feminism had radical consequences that extended well beyond revolutionizing the lives of its most active participants. In the movement's earliest years the simple act of speaking publically about lesbianism was a bold act. By celebrating lesbianism and speaking openly about women-centered sexuality, these activists exposed a generation of women to the

¹¹ Works of this nature are discussed below in the historiographical section of the introduction.

¹² New studies, some coming from history but typically from English, women's studies, and the like, are examining specific facets lesbian feminist activity, such as women's music or print culture. They do not, however, take up lesbian feminism as a social movement in which diverse activities were woven together both locally and nationally. See, for example: Julie Enzser, *A Fine Bind: Lesbian-Feminist Publishing from 1969-2009* (unpublished manuscript, in progress); Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

idea that they had the option of sexual fulfillment without men. Yet the movement was scarcely about sex alone. More than anything, lesbian feminists hoped to demonstrate that revolutionary change was possible when women put one another first. They worked to eradicate an oppressive, hierarchical society by destroying patriarchy, which they believed was the root of all inequality. The most effective way to do so was by separating from men. Patriarchy would crumble without the myriad ways women's labor served as its primary crutch. Once it fell, the new women-centered world that lesbian feminists were creating would serve as model for a new egalitarian society. By living among women, by redefining the meaning of womanhood, and by building institutions entirely on their own, lesbian feminists hoped to demonstrate that a different future was possible and to create the structures from which it would grow.

As much as this is a story of lesbian feminism it is also one of lesbians working alongside their straight sisters to support the broader women's movement. The lesbians of this study saw their politics as distinct from that of straight women and opted to work in separatist collectives. Separatism did not mean disengaging from the women's community, however. To the degree that they shared the same visions for a liberated future, they saw themselves as part of a shared venture. Rather than their separatism being isolationist, the activism of most lesbian feminist collectives, and the women I study here, worked to create opportunities for women to come together. They did so to encourage the growth of a world of woman-identified women, their terminology for women who put one another first in all parts of their lives. The lesbian feminist vision of liberation required all women coming together. It is through such political vision that lesbian feminist labor served centrally in sustaining the women's movement. Women's liberation coined "the personal is political." Lesbian feminists took this to its furthest reaches. Lesbians challenged straight women to push their politics further and interrogate their most intimate

relationships. For some this was liberating. Others found it a threat to their feminist politics. Still others remained committed to excluding lesbianism from their political worldview. No matter the range of (straight) feminist positions, lesbians were active feminist participants whose presence required ongoing negotiation as to the place of sex and sexuality in the project of women's liberation.

Terminology and Methodology

Before exploring the historiography with which I engage in this study I want to note my choices regarding terminology. The terms used by movement women to describe themselves and their politics varied greatly and changed quickly. They also continue to be contested in contemporary scholarship. I use "lesbian feminism" as an umbrella term that encompasses those women whose were driven by attention to both gender and sexuality and who engaged in a politics independent of gay liberation and the women's movement. It was not a cohesive ideology but rather an amalgam of the ideas and actions of those for whom women's sexual identity was a form of resistance. Through the years covered in this study they referred to themselves variously as gay gals or gay women, woman-identified women or woman-loving women, feminist lesbians or lesbian feminists. The idea of being "woman-centered," "woman-loving," or "woman-identified" held particular resonance among them. While the concept of being "woman-identified" emerged in the east and that of being "woman-loving" in the west, activists used them interchangeably and I do the same. They spoke to the outward focus of what had previously been private and deviant feelings. They also accommodate the blurring of boundaries that occurred through the 1970s as women of various sexual identities and backgrounds drifted into the lesbian feminist sphere of activity. As such, I use them rather interchangeably with "lesbian feminist." The movement's language and meaning was sometimes

clearly articulated while at others it held an imprecision not surprising giving the pace of change and the energy of their revolutionary spirit. Where possible and important to the narrative, though, I strive to use terms as the women themselves did.

Then there is a matter about how to speak about lesbian feminists in relation to the women's movement and their sisters within it. While a good number of lesbians chose to separate from those organizations and threads of feminism that did not acknowledge them or prioritize their needs, there were also a number who stayed behind. In places where I need to differentiate between those explicitly identified as lesbians and those who were not, I deploy the useful if somewhat awkward "(straight) feminism." This is an attempt to recognize the ways in which feminist organizations commonly operated as representing the interests of straight women only, while also acknowledging that not all women within them were heterosexual. There were also many scales of separatism occurring within and among these movements. The women's movement itself, after all, was an act of separatism in that it insisted upon direct attention to and investment in the specific oppressions that women faced. When I use this concept throughout I work to specify its meaning. Generally, I use it to refer to lesbians' decisions to create their own organizations. How this manifested varied. Those women who took separatism to its furthest reaches by insisting on working only with those who fully share their ideological positions did not compose the majority of the lesbian movement and as such they are not the focus of this project. Instead, the women of this study espoused separatism by degrees. They chose to work alongside and often live amongst other lesbians but also worked in conjunction with (straight) feminists. This was a common element of their "project activism" – the institutions they built to foster lesbian feminism and support women's community (explored in chapter 3).

The language of American feminist history is equally contested. I choose to use “women’s movement” and “women’s liberation” interchangeably. These terms have been used in different ways to describe different threads of feminism but over time and in different places these distinctions lost their meaning. Together, they refer to those individuals and groups who viewed themselves as part of the loosely connected groups working to advance women’s lives whether through reform or revolution. I understand that in some instances, “women’s liberation” has referred more specifically to the younger, more radical part of the movement (or even a separate movement). I have not found, however, that distinction held much meaning in California.¹³ The women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s had many threads: liberal, radical, socialist, cultural, and so on. While certain groups organized around specific politics of these various threads, I find that through the 1970s these lines blurred as well. Lesbians were a part of each and lesbian feminism included all of these ideological impulses. Finally, I speak often of “community” in this project, probably because it was a term of such utility among the women I study. At times they used it to refer to those women actively engaged with lesbian and/or feminist politics. At other times, however, it refers to a wider circle of women that movement activists believed had a vested interest in their work and who might at some point be an active part of it. I try to my best to indicate the meaning in my usage, as much as it is possible to infer from theirs.

While lesbians’ relationship to their gay brothers is less a part of this study, they were of course still participants in the gay rights movement and were also in the process of becoming

¹³ Historians Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry explain in their new synthesis of American feminism that “this separation of the feminist generations did not last long, and for many women outside the big cities, the separation never existed, because the movement quickly became vastly larger and more varied than the sum of its organizations.” Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women’s Movements* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014), 71.

part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) community. When I discuss the “gay movement” throughout I am referring to a movement that included women but was dominated by gay men. As a result, this movement commonly (though not entirely) ignored issues of particular relevance to gay women. Where it is necessary I identify more specific threads of gay politics but, as I do with discussing feminism, I use “gay movement” or “gay rights” to refer to the range of activism seeking to demolish homophobia. “Queer” is also scattered throughout. Among those who reclaimed the word (once a homophobic slur) in the 1990s, to be queer is to radically reject heteronormativity and to celebrate transgressive identities and behaviors. More recently it has come to function as an umbrella term for those who reject heteronormativity and the gender binary. The latter is typically how I make use of the word. It was not a term that the women I study commonly used to define themselves but it does have a certain utility in certain instances. In the introduction it allows me to be in conversation with contemporary scholars of sexuality. “Queer” has particular utility when discussing a time and a community in flux. In chapter 1, for example, when women of the 1950s and 1960s struggled to make sense of what it meant to be drawn to other women and lacked the language to define themselves, I deploy the term to indicate the ambiguity at play in their identity and movement building. With a community of ever-evolving identifiers, participants, and ideas, an umbrella term is sometimes necessary to be inclusive without falsely classifying individuals.

The nature of lesbian feminist lives in the period I study complicates uncovering the realities of their experiences; such challenges pushed me to use diverse primary materials, deploy close readings, and create new sources through oral history interviews. Grassroots activists’ critique of hierarchy and formal structure meant that record-keeping and documentation were not priorities (though this began to change by the end of the 1970s). For the groups highlighted in

my chapter case studies, archival collections exist only for the Daughters of Bilitis, A Woman's Place, and Old Wives Tales.¹⁴ This means that such documentation was not available for chapters 2 and 4 as well as for the section of chapter 3 in which I discuss Full Moon. It is also necessary to note that while A Woman's Place collections exist at the Lesbian Herstory Archives and the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, the collections include scant material on the bookstore's first five years (the primary period under consideration in chapter 3). I spent a good amount of time with organizational and personal lesbian/feminist/lesbian feminist archival collections not directly relating to my case studies but useful in gleaning insights all the same. The Diana Press papers, for example, proved quite helpful as it was part of the women in print community and thus included materials and communications from bay area bookstores.¹⁵ Nancy Stockwell's papers demonstrate how intertwined the national community of lesbian feminists was and how effectively they spread information about and to one another. Her letters are a veritable who's who of some of the movement's most well-known. Using such collections help to give voice to those women and groups who did not create or make available their movement documents.

With such limitations I relied heavily on periodicals to help piece together the narrative I lay out here. The periodicals are limited, too, and require close and creative readings. Discussion of specific periodicals occurs throughout the chapters but I note here those most significant to the study and where silences existed. A host of women's papers emerged in the bay area in the early 1970s though most lasted only for a handful of issues. The paper most useful to the beginning of

¹⁴ The decision to include Old Wives Tales in chapter 3 was made after my research trips and as such I have not reviewed this collection. I intend to review those materials for the manuscript.

¹⁵ The Diana Press was a Baltimore based women's printing company that merged with the Bay Area Women's Press Collective at the end of the 1970s. Diana Press Records (Collection 2135), finding aid at UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8tq62h1/>, accessed 9.17.2016.

the seventies that had significant lesbian influence was *It Ain't Me Babe* (1971-1972). With only one issue in 1972, the Bay Area was left without a women's paper through 1972 and 1973. Scant sources for this early period meant looking to a range of bay area independent press, piecing together stories from events calendars, contact information, often brief blurbs on women's organizing. *Plexus* began print in the spring of 1974 and identified as a paper for the women's community but included significant lesbian participation and content. It is particularly important to chapters 3 and 4. Movement women around the country worked diligently to ensure that they knew about one another's papers and worked to build national subscriptions. *Off Our Backs* became one of the most successful in reaching and reporting on feminism around the country. While based in Washington, D.C. it is a source of information and a way to understand west coast women from an outside perspective. In the world of lesbian-identified papers, the long-running national lesbian monthly *The Ladder* ended in 1972 as well. By that time the Furies began publishing their eponymous paper which proved markedly influential during its year and a half run. Los Angeles DOB had started what would become the independent paper *The Lesbian Tide* in 1971 and saw the movement through to 1980. I found that these papers functioned in conversation with one another, played close attention to movement priorities and conflicts, and regularly responded to reader suggestions and critiques.

Finally, speaking with veteran feminists (lesbians and non) informally and during oral histories afforded a unique opportunity to gain a rich insight in the world of lesbian feminism.¹⁶ I began with more well-known names and the introductions available to me through friends.¹⁷

¹⁶ The term "veteran feminist" comes from Veteran Feminists of America, an organization of self-identified second wave feminists. Most of its active members were founders and pioneering members of the National Organization for Women. During the research phase of this project I was involved with the organization, working to bring into conversation different generations of feminists. Throughout this project they have been generous with the thoughts on the movement.

These early interviews were more general in nature, giving me a feel for California lesbian feminism. They also provided hints at where to look next and where I should focus my attention. As I got deeper into research and uncovered the names of those activists central to the various collectives I detail here, I did my best to locate and contact activists who could enrich the narratives of the groups I highlight. Often, these interviews with women whose names have mostly gone unrecorded proved the most insightful. Their generosity in sharing their specific memories and reflecting on the movement as a whole are the heart of the project.

Historiographical Legacies and Interventions

With this study I highlight the ways in which lesbians are missing in the histories of women's and gay activism. In her 2014 assessment of the state of LGBT history, Margot Canaday declared, "Writing about lesbians remains one of the riskiest projects that can be undertaken in the academy today."¹⁸ In such an environment, rare are the studies that focus solely on lesbians. With few such studies, lesbian lives come to view in fragmented ways as they are described through and in relation to gay men and (straight) women. Here, I briefly consider the social changes explored in the histories of sexuality that made the construction of lesbian identity possible before moving on to the events at mid-decade that contextualize the rise of lesbian and gay social movements. I consider also the roots of lesbian politics in early feminist circles. I then ask where lesbians fit in the histories of gay liberation and women's liberation. At this point I depart from gay historiography to focus more fully on the world of women's history. Finally, I consider what it means to place lesbians at the center of their movement history.

¹⁷ From 2001 through 2008 I was actively involved with the National Organization for Women in California at the local and statewide level (as well as a number of other grassroots women's projects). The relationships I built in these years, particularly my friendships with Zoe Nicholson and Barbara Love, were crucial to my ability to locate and receive introduction to many of the women I interviewed.

¹⁸Margot Canaday, "LGBT History," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 35, no. 1 (2014): 12.

Public and political lesbian communities that were “openly romantic and expressly sexual” began to emerge in the mid-twentieth century. Changes through the first few decades of the century created the conditions that made this shift possible. Urbanization and women’s increased entry into the public sphere made them, their work, and their relationships increasingly visible. The erosion of separate spheres through the changes in female education, the increase of women in the workforce, and redefinitions of women in popular culture which included the “redefinition of womanhood to include eroticism” altered the landscape of female sexuality.¹⁹ Once women were viewed as active sexual beings in their own right there emerged a new awareness of women’s same-sex intimacy.²⁰ In these years the rise of cultural explorations of homosexuality and the “infiltration of psychiatric and psychoanalytic concepts into popular culture” meant that “the resources for naming homosexual desire slowly expanded.”²¹ The movement of people around the country with the onset of World War II built upon these social and cultural shifts prompted a dramatic rise in the growth of gay and lesbian subcultures. Women moved to industrial and port cities in search of work or in service to country. In the military, in factories, and a variety of other social spaces, women came together in new ways, often separated from potential male partners or the watchful eyes of parents and families. A new lesbian culture emerged that helped to make visible female homosexuality.²²

¹⁹ John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 233.

²⁰ John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters*; Leila Rupp, “Imagine My Surprise: Women’s Relationships in Historical Perspective,” *Frontiers* (1981); Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Martha Vicinus, “‘They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong’: The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity,” *Feminist Studies* 18 (Fall 1992): 467-497.

²¹ John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 288.

²² This narrative is considered my fully in chapter 1. Here, I simply seek to note the shifts taking place at mid-decade out of which lesbian identity and community emerged. Allan Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: The Free Press, 1990); Nan Boyd, *Wide Open*

The 1950s witnessed the first formation of lesbian politics in spite of the postwar backlash against female independence, a powerful return to the ideology of domesticity, and the oppressive nature of Cold War conformity.²³ After the war many lesbians remained in urban areas where they had the opportunity to live as such. Hegemonic conformity of the decade kept gays and lesbians closeted, but the injustice of government gay purges and police witch hunts gave these communities a chance to come together around civil rights issues. A small but national community of female homophile activism grew alongside a male one throughout the fifties and sixties. The Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) established chapters in several cities and published a newspaper with a national and international readership. These activities formed the beginnings of a rich lesbian communication network that would dispense the ideas of lesbian feminism by the end of the 1960s to communities all over the country. Local chapters also created their own publications; in conjunction with local events they helped to extend the reach of public lesbianism. In addition to DOB, some women joined the male-dominated homophile groups such as Mattachine Society and ONE, Inc. Women occasionally attained leadership roles among their gay brothers but outside of DOB homophile groups remained driven mostly by interests and goals set by gay men. As historian John D’Emilio explains in his study of the homophile movement, lesbianism “demanded a much sharper break from traditional expectations

Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1991).

²³ For context of what women faced in postwar America: Stephanie Coontz, *The Way we Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, Revised Updated Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Elaine Tyler May, *Barren in the Promise Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness* (Harvard University Press, 1995); Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000).

of ‘proper’ womanhood than did the corresponding choice for men.”²⁴ Given their small numbers, the general dismissal of women’s issues by gays and straight men, and the desire for social and romantic contact, it is not surprising that women gravitated first towards DOB and then towards the emerging women’s organizations.²⁵

Within lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) history scholars have directed most attention towards the twentieth century and the development of queer identities, subcultures, and politics. Community and regional studies have thus far been the most informative way of accessing the gay past. The stigma of queer sexualities cautioned queers to limit expressions of their romantic and sexual relations to private spaces. Concentrated attention through local projects offers a compelling way of drawing out queer voices during the period when most queers remained closeted. George Chauncey pioneered this method in his study of male same-sex activity in New York City during the first half of the twentieth century. Since then, historians have demonstrated how space and place can create unique circumstances which shape local identities and collectivities.²⁶ My work is situated alongside such studies as a

²⁴ John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 93.

²⁵ Elizabeth Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*; Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*; John Howard, *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

²⁶ Gary Atkins, *Gay Seattle* (University of Washington Press, 2003); Peter Boag, *Same Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Nan Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (2003); Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.*; John Howard, *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*; John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001); Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Beacon Press, 1992); C. Todd White, *Pre-Gay L.A.: A Social History of the Movement for Homosexual Rights* (University of Illinois Press, 2009); James T. Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1945-1968* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (Rutgers University Press, 2001); Arlene Stein, *The Stranger Next Door: The Story of a Small Community’s Battle over Sex, Faith, and Civil Rights*

regional study beginning with the homophile years moving through the rise of radical gay liberation and the subsequent shift toward liberal reform. These studies serve to open up a rich world of gay and lesbian activity that helps to situate contemporary sexual identities and sexual communities.

All too commonly, however, works that claim to be studies of LGBT history, telling the story of the “homosexual minority” or “a gay and lesbian community” are actually structured around the gay male experience. When lesbians do come into view in such work, their lives are interpreted through the frameworks developed to explain the lives of gay men with little attention to how gender differences modify the experience of homosexuality. Historian Margot Canaday explains the “serious gender problem” that exists within LGBT history. This scholarship “has been and continues to be predominantly and unapologetically about male experience.”²⁷ Perhaps the existence of lesbian feminism provides the opportunity to generally ignore lesbians altogether. In the studies of gay politics, early conflicts and the departure of lesbian activists from gay liberation provide an easy point at which to dismiss lesbians from the narrative. There are those scholars who make an effort to integrate lesbians alongside gay men, or who highlight the ways in which the lesbian path differed from their gay brothers.²⁸ These works are important correctives. To this date, however, to study in the field is to be met with “work that is mostly

(Beacon Press, 2002); Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

²⁷ Margot Canaday, “LGBT History,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 35, no. 1 (2014): 12.

²⁸ Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Robert Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2012), 176; Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Timothy Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout: Chicago and the Rise of Gay Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

about men.”²⁹ To argue the existence of a separate lesbian feminist movement more fully aligned with the women’s movement while also criticizing gay histories for their exclusion of women may seem like folly. But if we are to build an inclusive history of sexual minorities lesbians must be well represented in the literature, wherever they are. This is not a call for scholars who tell gay (male) stories to do double duty. Rather, it is a call for them to consider and discuss openly the subjects of their work and refrain from making claims of inclusion where it does not exist. But it also means that the field as a whole needs to be more aware of gender, of the tools they use as scholars, and of where it is they are looking for LGBT subjects, even if this means looking outside of traditionally queer spaces.³⁰

My research brings LGBT history into conversation with women’s history as I seek to understand the story of those activists for whom sexuality and gender were inseparable components of their journey toward liberation. Theirs is a story more closely tied to the women’s liberation movement. This does not mean, however, that it is a story better told within women’s history. The studies of postwar feminisms come in a few shapes. There are the major synthetic narratives that look to tell a national story about postwar women revolutionizing American society. I spend some time with these below because they continue to inform understandings of who composed the movement and the work that contributed to changing they ways women experience gender, sex, and sexuality.³¹ Two other approaches to the study of feminisms have

²⁹ Margot Canaday, “LGBT History,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 35, no. 1 (2014): 12. Also needing conversation is how well, or not, these studies actually reaching beyond gays or lesbians to include the rest of the queer community and how they consider race and class.

³⁰ Canaday argues for greater embrace of the methods of feminist historians and expanding the parameters of LGBT history. Margot Canaday, “LGBT History,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 35, no. 1 (2014): 12-13.

³¹ The absence of lesbians in the older of these can certainly be understood as missing the opportunity to benefit from the world of LGBT history that has emerged in the past fifteen or twenty years. Yet the newer among them do no better discussing lesbians in the movement or lesbian feminism’s relationship to the women’s

been productive resources for me in considering how to intervene in such narratives. As with LGBT history there are community studies that explore how women experienced feminism locally, especially outside of the urban centers of activity so pivotal to the national narratives.³² Finally, there are those works that intervene in the problematic second wave narrative to demonstrate how this framework has, and continues to, exclude many women from the world of feminism activism during the latter half of the twentieth century. These works focus particularly on the vitally important roles played by women of color that need to be a part of our understanding of women's liberation. They also demonstrate the ways that activism targeting particular issues complicate longstanding second wave narratives.³³

The predominant narrative of lesbian feminists in relationship to the women's movement goes something like this: Radicalized by the gay and women's liberation, young women forced the issue of homosexuality on their straight sisters. Their claims of vanguardism proved so

movement. Perhaps most striking is the 2015 book "Rethinking American Women's Activism" which is part of the series American Social and Political Movements of the Twentieth Century. In it, Annelise Orleck discussed DOB and butch/femme culture in the 1950s and 1960s, the role of women in addressing the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, and the rise of Lesbian Avengers as part of queer nation. Yet for the whole of the 1970s she pens four pages, examining the writing of Audre Lorde and Dorothy Allison. This, alongside works like Cobble, Gordon, and Henry's *Feminism Unfinished* suggest an ongoing resistance among feminist scholars to recognize lesbian feminism as a significant force within the world of women's activism. Annelise Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

³² Lesbians often come into better focus in these studies. Outside of large urban centers, where feminist communities were smaller, lesbian and straight feminists often did not have the option of organizing separately. This situation manifested in a variety of ways. Judith Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002); Stephanie Gilmore: *Groundswell: Grassroots Feminist Activism in Postwar America* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University Illinois Press, 2008); Nancy Whittier, *Feminist Generation: The Persistence of the Radical Women's Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

³³ Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Winifred Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Wendy Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's Health in the Second Wave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Laura Pulido, *Black Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Becky Thompson, *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

disruptive that they brought about a gay/straight split which proved dangerously disruptive to the women's movement. As with studies of gay liberation, this conflict offers women's historians a point at which to turn away from the lesbian narrative. Feminist scholars do better than gay historians in acknowledging the contribution of lesbian activists, yet they mirror gay narratives by acknowledging lesbian presence only at points of conflict and rupture. Even when scholars acknowledge the disproportionate contribution of lesbians to the women's movement, their representation of feminism is a heterosexual one, in which lesbians are described as interlopers and their issues are marginalized. Lesbians are rarely integrated into the analysis, treated in scattered paragraphs and at most, a chapter of their own which further contributes to the image that they somehow distinct and not quite integrated, equal actors in the movement.³⁴

Within movement histories of women's liberation, lesbian feminism is typically described through one event, one collective, and many generalizations. The first two, the Lavender Menace action and the Furies Collective, are described below in detail to contextualize the origins of lesbian feminism that I explore in chapter 2. The generalizations stem from these two items and are at once laudatory and unflattering. Historian Ruth Rosen acknowledged that lesbians "contributed a disproportionate amount of dedication and energy to the [women's] movement" while focusing on the "gay/straight" split and dedicating a scant eleven page section to lesbians' role in the movement.³⁵ Alice Echols dedicates the better part of a chapter to lesbians but also suggests that lesbians disrupted the momentum of radical feminism and nudged

³⁴ Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America since 1960* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000); Christine Stansell, *The Feminist Promise: 1792 to the Present* (New York: The Modern Library, 2010).

³⁵ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 264-275.

women's liberation towards a depoliticized cultural feminism.³⁶ In their concise history of American feminisms, Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry credit lesbians as “persevering activists in causes of greater concern to straight women.” Yet on this same page they explained that the “lesbian question” was overblown by media and that in most cases, “gay and straight women worked together in camaraderie.” In their view, lesbian feminism had no unified meaning.³⁷ While lesbian feminism held many meanings for many different groups, this description discounts lesbian feminism as any sort of distinct political ideology. New scholarship is beginning to shed light on lesbians in this period as something more than a loud disruptive force or quiet labor in support of straight women.³⁸ As will be explored throughout this project, lesbian feminists commonly saw themselves as composing a distinct politics even as they understood themselves as part of the broader women's movement.³⁹

Just as lesbians had to struggle with during the women's liberation movement, these syntheses of modern feminisms indicate that lesbian feminists were not legitimate feminist actors. By describing lesbians as a disruptive force in the movement, scholars suggest that they were outsiders rather than women seeking to make the movement more inclusive of their personal politics. Looking only to the Radicalesbians and their manifesto “The Woman-Identified Woman,” feminist scholars interpret lesbian feminists as a cohesive whole declaring a vanguardist position in the women's movement. While the manifesto was markedly influential, there were a number of groups actively working to define the meanings of lesbian feminism in

³⁶ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 210-241.

³⁷ Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry, *Feminism Unfinished*, 91.

³⁸ Examples of these new works are discussed further below.

³⁹ Robert Self acknowledges this dual position that developed in the 1970s: “A public lesbian community began to emerge across the country that was both separate from and merged with the larger women's movement.” Robert Self, *All in the Family*, 181.

this time. Yet in the Radicalesbians Ruth Rosen sees the origins of a gay/straight split that “fragmented ‘the sisterhood,’ creating various kinds of hierarchies that excluded many women.”⁴⁰ She does not consider other women in the movement who similarly declared vanguardist politics, the ways lesbians felt objectified in the movement, or the degree to which homophobia helped to produce the separatism that ensued in 1970 and 1971.⁴¹ Sara Evans similarly described the “ruptures” as being engineered by lesbians.⁴² At their most troubling, these narratives are overtly hostile to lesbians, such as when Christine Stansell describes them as “knots of zealots” who “promulgated the dictate” of being woman-identified.⁴³ These interpretations of movement conflict do little to address the role of deeply ingrained homophobia in pushing lesbians out of a movement that they helped to build.

At issue too, in this scholarship, is the tendency to conflate lesbian feminism with cultural feminism. In the process, they depoliticize the project of lesbian feminism. Feminist historians define this shift toward institution building as the rise of cultural feminism. In their view, the emergence of “health clinics, shelters for battered women, rape crisis centers, bookstores, and collectives of all sorts” marked a shift away from the political purity of radical feminism.⁴⁴ Alice Echols argues that this strand of feminism grew through the mid-seventies because it “offered women a refuge from male supremacy” and “seemingly, a conduit out of subordination.”⁴⁵ In her view, it was an essentialist project inseparable from the rise of lesbian feminism, which

⁴⁰ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 174.

⁴¹ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 164-175.

⁴² Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave*, 122-124; 142-150.

⁴³ Christine Stansell, *The Feminist Promise*, 260.

⁴⁴ Sarah Evans, *Tidal Wave*, 155.

⁴⁵ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 269.

“nudged” feminism away from radicalism as women sought ways to overcome the gay/straight split.⁴⁶ While Echols explores a number of ways that cultural feminism played out, she defined its values through close readings of just a few theoretical offerings, including a piece authored by a group of Detroit women titled “The Fourth World Manifesto,” Jane Alpert’s “Mother Right: A New Feminist Theory,” and a series of speeches made by Robin Morgan in 1973.⁴⁷ Sara Evans shares much of this interpretation, though she argues that radical feminism branched in two directions, towards cultural feminism and socialist feminism. In Evans’ narrative, cultural feminism was characterized by three factors – it was separatist, essentialist, and esthetic. She further depoliticized it by association it with “‘hippie’ counterculture” with its “emphasis on...pleasure and self-expression through sex and drugs, on communal lifestyles, and on individual, frequently artistic creativity.”⁴⁸ Evans also emphasized the role of lesbians in advancing cultural feminism, particularly through ideals of separatism. Because lesbian feminists emphasized the lesbian potential of “female culture,” Evans argues that cultural feminism “had from the outset a strongly lesbian identity.”⁴⁹ In this historiographical work, then, there is a strong connection made between lesbians and a feminism that was escapist, essentialist, and depoliticized.

Such interpretations of lesbian feminism grow from the limited scope through which they are studied. The Radicalesbians, “The Woman-Identified Woman,” and the Furies scarcely scratch the surface of what lesbian feminism meant to the women who built the movement and carried it from the 1960s into the 1980s. Where, then, do we look for lesbians as political actors

⁴⁶ Ibid., 241.

⁴⁷ These texts do, in fact, define a cultural feminism that was essentialist. They do not, however, represent the primary position of lesbian feminism. Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 245-262.

⁴⁸ Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave* 143.

⁴⁹ Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave*, 149.

in their own right? Two of the most prominent studies that center lesbian lives and speak public lesbianism as a form of resistance address the topic from radically different perspectives.

Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, in their study of the lesbian bar culture in Buffalo, New York from the 1930s through the 1950s, explore how butch/femme culture was infused with acts of resistance. Women interviewed for the project commonly rejected the interpretation that their gender role presentations were mere copies of traditional gender norms. They instead saw themselves as challenging gender norms by making their relationships public. Marcia Gallo's study of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) unveils the other component of public lesbianism in the 1950s. In tracing the history of the organization from conception to end, Gallo describes the feminist nature of the earlier years and tracks DOB as its activists moved into gay and women's liberation.⁵⁰ These women would not begin actively using the term "feminist" until the mid to late 1960s. Yet embedded in many of their ideas and discussions, both at the time and in reflection, we see the expression of burgeoning feminist sensibilities. They understood quite powerfully the importance of expanding a range of options for women as a group, while also perceiving distinct challenges facing gay women compared to gay men.

While I situate my work more fully within women's history alongside studies of modern American feminisms, it is the field of LGBT history that is currently bringing lesbian lives into focus.⁵¹ Scholars in the field are locating the experiences of gay women in a host of political

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: A History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*; Marcia Gallo, "I'm Glad as Heck That You Exist': Feminist Lesbian Organizing in the 1950s," in *Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985*, eds. Kathleen A. Laughlin and Jacqueline L. Castledine (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁵¹ An exception can be found in recent anthologies of feminist history, which make an effort to include at least one article representing the lesbian experience. Mostly, these articles draw from scholarship on well-known groups such as the Furies and Daughters of Bilitis. Marcia Gallo, "I'm Glad as Heck That You Exist': Feminist Lesbian Organizing in the 1950s," in *Breaking the Wave: Women, their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985*, eds. Kathleen A. Laughlin and Jacqueline L. Castledine (New York: Routledge, 2011): 47-62; Ann M. Valk, "Living a Feminist Lifestyle: The Intersection of Theory and Action in a Lesbian Feminist Collective," in *No*

spaces as well as at home, at work.⁵² Lauren Gutterman and Alison Lefkowitz look to the experiences of women who engaged in same sex relationships while maintaining heterosexual marriages.⁵³ Daniel Rivers looks to the experiences of families headed by lesbian and gay parents.⁵⁴ Heather Murray considers the relationship between gays and lesbians on the journey of coming out.⁵⁵ Emily Hobson locates lesbians in a world of queer radicalism weaving together socialist and feminist of color politics.⁵⁶ There are also those works just now emerging that explore specific facets of lesbian culture and activism. Lesbian feminist publishing and print culture, in particular, is receiving solid attention.⁵⁷ Perhaps the most important influence on this project as A. Finn Enke's *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism*, which bridge feminist and queer history. Enke explores how women used public space to locate much broader and more diverse feminisms in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to their framework that argues the importance of locating feminist activism outside of traditional

Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010): 221-145.

⁵² I look here specifically at works focusing roughly on the time period I study, from the 1940s through the 1980s.

⁵³ Lauren Gutterman, "The House on the Borderland?: Lesbian Desire, Marriage, and the Household, 1945-1979" (PhD diss., New York University, 2012); Lauren Jae Gutterman, "The House on the Borderland?: Lesbian Desire, Marriage, and the Household, 1950-1979," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 1 (Fall 2012); Alison Lefkowitz, "The Peculiar Anomaly?: Same-Sex Infidelity in Postwar Divorce Courts," *Law and History Review* 33, no. 3 (August 2015): 665-701.

⁵⁴ Daniel Winunwe Rivers, *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States since World War II* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

⁵⁵ Heather Murray, *Not in This Family: Gays and the Meaning of Kinship in Postwar North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

⁵⁶ Emily K. Hobson, "Policing Gay LA: Mapping Racial Divides in the Homophile Era, 1950-1967," in *The Rising Tide of Color: Race, State Violence, and Radical Movements Across the Pacific*, Ed. Moon-Ho Jung (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014): 188-212; Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

⁵⁷ Julie Enzser, *A Fine Bind: Lesbian-Feminist Publishing from 1969-2009* (unpublished manuscript, in progress); Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

political organizations, Enke also highlights the blurring of “lesbian” and “woman” that took place through the 1970s. This requires that we look more closely to sites of feminist activity to see the contributions of a much more diverse cast of actors than the historiography has acknowledged.⁵⁸

Finally, it is important to note the recent trend in the history of sexuality that acknowledges the role of the state in shaping sexuality as well as the role of sexuality in reshaping the American political system. Margot Canaday’s *The Straight State* explores how it set about policing homosexuality through the 20th century and how, in doing so, it “constituted homosexuality in the construction of a stratified citizenry.”⁵⁹ This work demonstrates a problem I seek to address: the ways in which male homosexuality has been used to shape meanings of queer sexuality broadly. Canaday demonstrates how the process of constructing sexuality is largely determined by the behaviors of gay men with little attention to how gender modified the ways women experienced their sexuality. In *All in the Family* historian Robert Self also examines the relationship between sexuality and the state. He shows how changing ideas of gender, sexuality, and family were central forces in shaping the nation’s economic and political structures from New Deal liberalism to 1980s conservatism. Such national studies begin the work of integrating sexuality into the broader narrative of United States history and are critically important in demonstrating its importance. While these works on that explore the relationship between citizenship and sexuality offer the possibility of making significant advances in queer history, they do not address all queer communities equally. As Canaday demonstrates, women have historically had a different relationship to the state. As Self acknowledges, “Only by

⁵⁸ Originally published under “Anne Enke,” the Scholar know goes by “Finn Enke). A. Finn Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁵⁹ Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 4.

making subcultures visible—what later gay activists called coming out—could lesbians lay claim to full citizenship. Yet striving for full citizenship in a patriarchal world hostile to lesbianism was less important to many women than striving toward their vision of a ‘lesbian nation.’⁶⁰ While impossible to escape, the women of this study largely rejected the state as the site of political activism. Rather, they envisioned working outward from a world of woman-identified women, creating their very own liberated society that would act as a model for complete revolution.

The Rise of (East Coast) Lesbian Feminism

San Francisco Bay Area women were not alone; across the country lesbian activists similarly tried to situate their politics within gay and women’s liberation only to find that they were not fully embraced by either. New York’s Radicalesbians and Washington D.C.’s the Furies were the most well-known but there were others too. Throughout the Midwest and the South lesbians formed their own cells, groups, and publications and joined in conversation with their sisters on the coasts. Women in the middle of the country were equally a part of this rise in lesbian politics. Between 1970 and 1972 lesbian feminist groups took shape in cities like Iowa City, Chicago, Ann Arbor, and Atlanta, among others. Iowa City’s Women’s Liberation Front announced itself to the women’s movement in the summer of 1970 with the first issue of their publication *Ain’t I a Woman*. In this inaugural issue the Gay Women’s Liberation Collective also announced its formation. The group grew out of an effort by a number of lesbians who sought to improve straight/gay dialogue by holding a workshop at a May 1970 women’s conference. During “the first meetings of the gay sisters” as a caucus formed to plan the workshop, the use of consciousness-raising helped them “to understand that our needs were important and valid in

⁶⁰ Robert Self, *All in the Family*, 176.

their own right.”⁶¹ In short order *Ain't I a Woman* came to identify fully as a lesbian feminist paper. Women in Chicago Gay Liberation formed a women's caucus then separated to form Chicago Lesbian Liberation in 1971.⁶² Ann Arbor, Michigan had its own Radicalesbians, some of whom began publishing the journal *Purple Star* in the spring of 1971. Taken together, these groups demonstrate a common effort to establish lesbian politics that spoke to the specific conditions of their local environments. Relationships with gay liberation varied but in each case lesbians made deliberate decisions to ally their politics with the women's movement. As such decisions solidified into separatist practices lesbian feminists reach out to one another around the country and began to see themselves as something distinctive and capable of creating change. They circulated one another's writings, advertised conferences and festivals, debated identity politics, kept each other up to date on local goings on, and forged relationships that supported a growing movement.

While this project focuses on the San Francisco Bay Area as a critical site in the development of lesbian feminism it is important to acknowledge the context in which that took place. What began as isolated efforts to build community grew quickly into a national network of cooperative mobilization. Even in large cities lesbian communities were relatively small. The number of those willing to be public and political was even smaller. Reaching out was a critical means of survival and of building an independent movement as lesbians broke ties with gay men and straight feminists. Looking to other sites of lesbian political activity provides context of the existing origin story of the movement. But it does other work as well. Exploring the New York story a bit further disrupts the idea of a monolithic Radicalesbians force behind the rise of the

⁶¹ “Gay Womanhood,” *Ain't I A Woman* 1, no. 1 (June 26, 1970): 3.

⁶² Marie J. Kuda, “Chicago, Illinois,” *Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures*, eds. George Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman (New York: Routledge, 1999).

movement. I also look to key early sites of lesbian feminist activity to situate the interstate relationships and networks that California lesbians relied upon and sustained as the years progressed. Highlighting other sites of lesbian activism also indicates that further inquiry is needed into even these more well-known groups.

In May 1970 the newly formed Radicalesbians took over the Second Congress to Unite Women in New York. There is good reason why so much of our understanding of lesbian feminism revolves around this event.⁶³ The Radicalesbians was the first lesbian group to take shape in New York since the city's Daughters of Bilitis chapter formed over a decade earlier, helping to explain its reputation as the foremost lesbian feminist organization. Emboldened by Betty Friedan's infamous slur, the Radicalesbians donned purple shirts emblazoned with "lavender menace" as they took over the opening session of the coalitional conference.⁶⁴ The theatrics included: the cutting of lights and microphone; "rebel yells;" placards reading "women's liberation is a lesbian plot" and "we are your worst nightmare/your best fantasy;" and a ripping off of blouses only to reveal their menacing t-shirts. The humor of the moment won over most of the 300-400 women in the audience as the Radicalesbians explained the experiences that helped them create their influential manifesto "The Woman-Identified Woman."⁶⁵ A carefully crafted and remarkably well written document, it circulated quickly thanks to the

⁶³ Lesbian feminist and participant in the action Karla Jay argued that it was "the single most important action organized by lesbians who wanted the women's movement acknowledge our presence and needs." Karla Jay, *Tales of a Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 137.

⁶⁴ During her tenure as president of the National Organization for Women, Betty Friedan worked to suppress the association of the organization (and the movement generally) with lesbianism, calling lesbians a "lavender menace." She feared that any appearance of lesbianism would paint feminists as deviant man-haters rather than women with legitimate critiques of the status quo. The exclusion of lesbianism as a topic of discussion was not the only offense created by the Congress. During its first iteration, planners failed to list the Daughters of Bilitis on its list of sponsor. Sydney Abbott and Barbara Love, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), 110; Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: A Memoir of Liberation* (New York: The Dial Press, 1999), 70-71.

⁶⁵ Sydney Abbott and Barbara Love, *Sappho Was a Right On Woman*; Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*; Karla Jay, *Tales of a Lavender Menace*.

exposure it received through the Second Congress and the growing reach of the feminist press.⁶⁶ The manifesto gifted the movement with the term “woman-identified,” which became a core concept within lesbian politics. It quickly became the representative text of lesbian feminism and laid the foundation for how the movement spoke about lesbian feminism. It was not the only document of its kind but there is no denying that it has come to be understood as the primary definition of lesbianism in the women’s movement.

The birth of lesbian feminism as a movement came with the creation of a new kind of womanhood, of which “The Woman-Identified Woman” became the cornerstone. Women-centered consciousness, the Radicalesbians argued, empowered positive self-worth, a quality vital to a movement to liberate women.⁶⁷ This framework has since been viewed as one that made lesbianism a restrictive, essentialist identity more concerned with emotional connections than sexual attraction. Yet woman-identification was, for much of the 1970s, an expansive concept. These new definitions tried to reject all of the connotations associated with patriarchal definitions of female sexuality. Further, they were (at least initially) conceived of as a means of opening lesbianism to more (all) women. Being “woman-identified” meant embracing a “primal commitment” to other women. This definition included those who were already lesbian-identified. But it also made space for those (straight) women willing to let go of the heterosexual privilege that kept them bound to oppressive systems. Encouraging all women to be “woman-identified” was a means of dismantling the power of concepts created by, and viewed as

⁶⁶ The earliest date it appeared (that I have found thus far) in a California publication was in the August/September 1970 issue of *The Ladder*. It is likely that it was shared coast to coast via personal relationships or east coast publications before that date. Radicalesbians, “Woman-Identified Woman,” *The Ladder* 14, no. 11-12 (August/September 1970): 6-8.

⁶⁷ Radicalesbians, “Woman-Identified Woman,” in *American Sisterhood*, 333-338.

sustaining, a patriarchal society.⁶⁸ The term circulated quickly and had great utility, as did “woman-loving,” “woman-centered,” and related phrasings. While this document is hailed as the pioneering test of lesbian feminism, it was produced out of a broader dialogue happening amongst lesbian feminists hubs across the country and fueled by a proliferation of lesbian manifestos. Gay Women’s Liberation and other lesbian feminist groups around the country shared in this process of redefining lesbianism by creating a queer womanhood that was open to any woman willing to make women the central priority in their lives.

In New York, the days and weeks after the Lavender Menace action saw Radicalesbians embarking on the task of turning theory into practice. They were fully committed to a separation from men and dedicating their energy to “the quality of our exchanges with women.”⁶⁹ In spite of the separatist sentiments of their manifesto, members continued efforts to build relationships with (straight) feminist groups. For a number of months they attended social events and addressed movement meetings with the purpose of fostering understanding among within straight feminism. Such efforts kept the issue of lesbianism alive in the New York feminist scene. Their visibility brought an onslaught of new members and soon fifty new members were shaped into small consciousness-raising groups. Some of these participants remained straight-identified but the majority came out as lesbian (whether immediately or over time). This surge of membership and activity was relatively short-lived. Ideological differences and interpersonal

⁶⁸ Consider, for example, the resolutions drawn up at the end of the second Congress to Unite Women, in which lesbians urged declaration of the movement to be a “lesbian plot” and urge any lesbian slur “be affirmed, not denied.” The point of doing so was disrupting the power of lesbian-baiting in keeping women separated from and fearful of one another. See Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain*, 264-265.

⁶⁹ Very little information is available tracing the history of the Radicalesbians. This information is from a statement published in the December 1970/January 1971 issue of the GLF publication *Come Out!* This same issue included a statement from them when they still went by “GLF Women’s Caucus,” however, so it would appear that this issue included documents from throughout 1970. Radicalesbians, “Leaving the Gay Men Behind,” in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, twentieth anniversary edition, Karla Jay and Allen Young, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 290-293.

conflicts sent many members in search of new political outlets, including a number of founders. Karla Jay left just weeks after the Lavender Menace action. Rita Mae Brown and Martha Shelley moved on not long after that. These women continued to be iconic “radical lesbians” and considered representative of Radicalesbian politics long after their formal affiliation with the group came to end. Those women who took up the task of carrying the group forward were quick to make this distinction.⁷⁰ While the Radicalesbians made lesbianism visible within the women’s community, they did not immediately displace New York DOB. Nor did their success prohibit other groups from forming. Rather than function as the representative of New York lesbian feminism, it was one of any groups that negotiated the relationship between gay and straight feminists and shaped the rise of a separate movement.

During the years that Radicalesbians was active (the first phase of lesbian feminism, 1969-1973) it worked alongside New York DOB, Gay Women’s Liberation Front, supergroup, and Lesbian Liberation Committee/Lesbian Feminist Liberation. Not all of these efforts were entirely separatist in nature. For a time NY DOB maintained ties with homophile men while also increasing attention to feminist campaigns. Tensions mounted under the leadership of Ruth Simpson who developed an authoritarian presence and an intense relationship with radical feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson, committing a great deal of energy to straight feminist goings on. Two groups confronted Simpson. “The Caucus,” led by Tina Mandel and author Alma Routsong, wanted DOB to be a moderate space that empowered lesbians to embrace their sexuality and find the pleasure of “lesbian feminist life styles and community.”⁷¹ This faction was deeply influence by Routsong and Mandel’s participation in the constellation of CR groups known as

⁷⁰ Sydney Abbott and Barbara Love, *Sappho Was a Right On Woman*, 113-134; Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace*, 147, 165; Ann M. Valk, *Radical Sisters*, 141.

⁷¹ Toby Marotta, *The Politics of Homosexuality*, 265.

“supergroup.” This body was organized by former Radicalesbians Sydney Abbott and Barbara Love, and included Kate Millett and recently purged NY NOW member Ivy Bottini. The other opposition came from the Feminist Workshop. Initially this body was run by Atkinson and was designed to “train ‘real lesbians’ for their positions in the feminist vanguard.” Participants began to question the focus on Atkinson’s celebrity and expectations placed upon them to support her work (including act as her “bodyguards” at speaking events). Together, these two sources of opposition ousted Simpson and set up a cooperative structure that collaborated with Gay Women’s Liberation Front and Radicalesbians. The conflicting priorities of these groups made their idealized organization untenable, however, and NY DOB came to an end in all but name at the end of 1971.⁷²

By early 1972 lesbian feminism in New York had been “reduced to small coteries centered around political veterans.”⁷³ Lesbians looking for an institutional base beyond the small group shifted focus to the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) where female members formed a women’s caucus. A central factor in these various maneuverings appears to have been concern over a having physical space to call home. A major debate in the final days of DOB was which building to lease and a major appeal of GAA was the lease it held on a once abandoned Firehouse. Late in 1971 the Women’s Subcommittee of GAA transformed into the Lesbian Liberation Committee as a means of politicizing lesbians and bringing them into the gay movement. Through 1972, however, lesbians increasingly came into conflict with the men of GAA who did not appear to support women-only activities. These encounters combined with the influence of lesbian feminist literature and conversations with Radicalesbians to push GAA

⁷² Toby Marotta, *The Politics of Homosexuality*, 256-274.

⁷³ Toby Marotta, *The Politics of Homosexuality*, 275. At this time Radicalesbians was composed of about six women, GWLF a dozen, and NY DOB existed only as a bank account controlled by Rose Jordan. CRs continued to have the largest participation, with supergroup having fifteen active subgroups.

women to embrace the idea of separation. It was a much debated and negotiated decision that required assurances that women who chose to stay with GAA would not be judged and that the separate group would still have access to the Firehouse. The split finally became formal in early 1973. This group, Lesbian Feminist Liberation, would foster separatist lesbian feminism in New York through the 1970s.⁷⁴

Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., the Furies Collective took shape and became a significant force in defining lesbian feminism as a separatist movement. Radicalesbian Rita Mae Brown relocated to Washington, D.C. in early 1971 with the idea that women needed to form their own political party. She met a number of D.C. natives as well as women who had recently migrated from as far away as Vermont and Illinois to join the city's thriving women's liberation community.⁷⁵ Twelve lesbians in total decided to live and work together and fully immerse themselves in the shared goal of bringing about revolution. First as "Those Women," then as "the Furies," they set out to create an agenda that would tear down patriarchy and establish national feminist political leadership. Rita Mae Brown, Charlotte Bunch, Sharon Deevey, Joan Biren, Nancy Myron, Helaine Harris, Tasha Peterson, Susan Hathaway, Ginny Berson, Lee Schwing, Jennifer Woodul, and Coletta Reid rented three Capitol Hill neighboring houses and set about building a movement. They declared:

Sexism is the root of all other oppressions. . . . Lesbianism is not a matter of sexual preference, but rather one of political choice which every woman must make if she is to become woman-identified and thereby end male supremacy. Lesbians, as outcasts from every culture but their own have the most to gain by ending race, class, and national supremacy within their own ranks. Lesbians must get out of the straight women's movement and form their own movement in order to be taken seriously, to stop straight women from oppressing us, and to force straight women to deal with their own

⁷⁴ Toby Marotta, *The Politics of Homosexuality*, 275-291.

⁷⁵ Barbara Love, ed., *Feminist Who Changed America, 1963-1975* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 413.

Lesbianism.⁷⁶

Living their politics each day, members set out to fine-tune their politics and create the path to a liberated society. The collective lasted scarcely a year, though it continued to influence lesbian feminism through its publication of the same name, which was in print until June 1973. The group ultimately splintered under the weight of the expectations members placed upon themselves but it had a profound effect on practices of lesbian separatism and helped to create the ever increasing world of woman-identified women.⁷⁷

Over the years an intricate network of personal and political networks wove together the women who pioneered lesbian feminism's earliest endeavors. A number of them remained active in the movement through its height in the 1970s and into the eighties thus acting as unifying threads throughout the course of the movement. These women played unique roles in shaping the meaning of lesbian feminism and tending to its survival. Radicalesbian Martha Shelley moved to the San Francisco Bay Area and became part of the Women's Press Collective. Rita Mae Brown moved on to the Furies. After she left collective politics behind she continued to share her revolutionary thinking through her writing and had lesbians raving for years to come. She built intimate relationships with west coast women, including Del Martin, Phyllis Lyon, and Sally Gearhart. After the Furies, Coletta Reid started Diana Press. Along with Casey Czarnik she sustained the press through its relationship with the Feminist Economic Network in Detroit and eventually moved it to California where they merged with the Women's Press Collective. Helaine Harris and Lee Schwing created Women in Distribution which they ran with Cynthia

⁷⁶ Ginny Berson, "The Furies," *Furies 1*, no. 1 (January 1972): 1.

⁷⁷ The Furies were recognized around the country as important thinkers in the movement. When the Furies fully folded, paper and all, lesbian feminists around the country mourned its loss. In California the Los Angeles-based publication *The Lesbian Tide* lauded the staff who "contributed much to a growing lesbian feminist movement and politic." The Tide Collective offered its "deepest appreciation to all the women who produced and kept alive a fine publication for so long." Jeanne Cordova, "Furies Folds," *Lesbian Tide 3*, no. 1 (August 1, 1973): 13.

Gair. They build longstanding relationships with west coast women, including Nancy Stockwell who was a significant force in publishing the Bay Area's feminist paper *Plexus*. Stockwell built these relationships via her time with the journal *Quest*, established by Furies member Charlotte Bunch. Ginny Berson and Jennifer Woodul were among the founders of Olivia Records, which migrated west, first to Los Angeles and then to the Bay Area. If it seems a complex web of relationships, it was. What matters is getting a picture of the interconnectedness of the lesbian feminists around the country who shaped this new movement.

The Political Landscape of the City by the Bay

This project is in part a response to the dearth of historical studies of California feminists and lesbians. The void is surprising given the state's position as a leader in progressive politics and its longstanding reputation as a haven for the queer community. My research began by seeking to find the lesbians in the women's movement. I found the Radicalesbians and the Furies, but I also found the Daughters of Bilitis. I was struck by the activism of this organization that first formed in San Francisco and left questioning why we did not know more about the women's community in which it functioned and the activism it might have inspired. The more I dug into archives and the lives of remarkable and remarkably ordinary women I found that California was home to a thriving world of lesbian feminism. It began in 1955 with the birth of DOB and continued on for nearly three decades. In this project I focus on the San Francisco Bay Area (namely, San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley) as it was home to the west coast's first lesbian feminist organization, some of the nation's first lesbian feminist institutions, and a far-reaching network of associations that helped to knit together a national lesbian feminist movement.

San Francisco's history offered a rich climate for the rise of sexual politics. The city's legacy of lawlessness and promiscuity was rooted in its Gold Rush past. The sexual commerce that served a predominantly male community evolved into a site of sex tourism by the early twentieth century. This longstanding sexual permissiveness produced the conditions necessary for the emergence of "publicly visible queer cultures and communities" in the 1930s and 1940s.⁷⁸ Gay and lesbian bars emerged as part of "sexualized and racialized entertainments" and were "tightly bound to sex trade and prostitution."⁷⁹ Initially part of a shared queer culture, a distinct lesbian bar scene emerged in the 1950s with a number of bars owned and run by women. This did not sever the relationship between lesbians and sex workers, however. As individuals who existed outside of proper feminine roles, and with few options for public gathering, they shared bars, using them similarly "to make sexual contacts, form associations, and protect themselves from the police."⁸⁰ As public spaces, lesbian bars highlighted transgressive behaviors and identities. Both the homophile movement and lesbian feminism emerged in part as a rejection of the bar scene but they also grew out of and relied upon it. For many activists bars represented an inappropriate affiliation between lesbianism and sexual deviance. Yet as the primary site of lesbian visibility, bars were essential to making contacts for queer women of all identity categories. Further, the policing of gay bars provided one of the key motivations for gay and lesbian mobilization and resistance.⁸¹ The sexual legacies of the city thus fostered the rise of San Francisco gay politics.

⁷⁸ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸¹ Josh Sides, *Erotic City*, 13-23; Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 68-101.

San Francisco's gay movement expanded in scope and scale through the 1960s. The Mattachine Society, discussed in chapter 1, persisted through the decade but lost influence as the community increasingly viewed it as too conservative. New groups emerged with specific purposes and with greater confidence in their political agency. In an indication that the bar culture was not entirely separate from the world of gay activism, the first "gay venture into city politics" came from drag star Jose Sarria rather than from a homophile organization. His ability to garner thousands of votes indicated that the gay and lesbian community could organization as a political unit.⁸² Further, bar owners established The Tavern Guild in 1962 to protect patrons by providing advice on dealing with law enforcement and making legal counsel available upon arrest.⁸³ At the end of 1964 religious and homophile leaders partnered to establish the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH) to address homophobia in the church. CRH extended its influence well beyond the congregations of its members and sponsored a number of groundbreaking events included a Candidates' Night for the gay community and leafleting at the State Fair (after a request for booth space was denied).⁸⁴ Society for Individual Rights also emerged in 1964. Founders felt a need for a group more assertive about gay rights but that also merged this work with gay culture (particularly bars). It was organized as a "gay male membership organization" and its programming catered specifically to gay men.⁸⁵ Each of these organizations, then, restricted the ability of women to participate. A few DOB members actively

⁸² Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996), 42.

⁸³ Elizabeth Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities*, 50.

⁸⁴ Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 106-109, 128-129.

⁸⁵ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 190-191.

participated in CRH but otherwise these developments in gay politics catered to men. They also hastened the onset of gay liberation.⁸⁶

While historical narratives typically situate the 1969 Stonewall Riots as the transition point between the homophile and gay liberation movements, the San Francisco story followed a different trajectory. The city's new groups facilitated increasingly public, confrontational activity that helped bring about a more radical gay politics on the west coast. Three years before Stonewall in the summer of 1966 "street youth, queens, and hustlers whose age and poverty made it difficult to patronize the bars" resisted police harassment at Compton's Cafeteria. Days of picketing and violence ensued when Compton's used the incident as an excuse to ban these young queers. Also in 1966, gay-identified youth established the radical action group Vanguard.⁸⁷ These developments did not galvanize a sudden, massive shift but they did indicate movement away from homophile politics was in process. In the spring of 1969 with the Committee for Homosexual Freedom (CHF) emerged as the first group in the city to identify as more overtly liberationist. When Gale Whittington was fired for appearing in an area newspaper with his lover, he discovered that SIR had grown too conservative to rally a response. He established CHF to coordinate protest activity on his behalf; it went on to organize other protests

⁸⁶ Historian John D'Emilio explores how these groups began to replace Mattachine as early as 1961. He argues that Mattachine failed to take advantage of new attacks on "sex deviants" that began in 1959 and continued into the early 1960s. The visibility of police campaigns and press coverage provided an opportunity to "recruit adherents." Having situated themselves as an alternative to the bar scene, homophile groups like Mattachine were also not well positioned to take advantage of the turmoil and resistance appearing in the city's gay bars. Finally, Mattachine's decision in 1961 to do away with its national structure resulted in a weakened local chapter. These developments created space for gay men to develop new, "politically effective" organizations. John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 82-192.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities*, 62-63; Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay*, 49.

for similar cases of discrimination.⁸⁸ In the coming months groups such as San Francisco Gay Liberation Front and the Institute for Homosexual Freedom helped to launch a new militancy in Bay Area gay politics.

Women's membership in these new groups was inconsistent. In part this may be explained by the relative separation between gay men and lesbians in San Francisco bars and the homophile movement. But lesbians certainly made efforts to join their brothers and gay men indicated an interest in working with their sisters. The Committee for Homosexual Freedom, for example, published a call for lesbians in the *San Francisco Free Press* stating, "It would be nice if some more gay girls would join the Committee for Homosexual Freedom," as "we feel a lot of good can be done by us." Only "a few girls" participated and "even the men often suggest we should have more female members."⁸⁹ Gay Liberation Front also advertised as an organization for gay men and lesbians. How much thought they put into inclusion is questionable, however, given that they ran membership advertisements that featured photographs of young male nudes.⁹⁰ Gay liberation included feminist-identified men but most lesbians ran up against the same conflicts with "masculinist biases" and the failure to recognize that "sexuality might have different implications for women than it did for men" that they found in the homophile years.⁹¹ Women were present in gay groups but the degree to which they were outnumbered meant that these gay liberation groups generally reflected male interests.

⁸⁸Elizabeth Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities*, 63-64; Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay*, 53; Katherine Turk, "'Our Militancy is in Our Openness': Gay Employment Rights Activism in California and the Question of Sexual Orientation in Sex Equality Law," *Law and History Review* 31, no. 2 (May 2013).

⁸⁹ Nelly Sharp, "C'Mon Girls!" *San Francisco Free Press* 1, no. 5 (November 15-30, 1969): 10.

⁹⁰ "Gay? Bi? Tired of Hiding???" *San Francisco Free Press* 1, no. 3 (October 16-31, 1969): 16.

⁹¹ Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay*, 55.

The emergent women's movement provided lesbians with an alternative to gay liberation. Historian Stephanie Gilmore looks to the history of lesbian and gay activity as well as student activism and the racial and ethnic diversity of the San Francisco as creating a city friendly to progressive activism and thus fostering strong feminist activity.⁹² Radical and liberal feminism emerged side by side in the city. The varied threads of feminist thought and activism followed different trajectories as the seventies progressed but in these early years a good deal of cooperation took place. The small group (or in east coast parlance, the consciousness-raising group) spread across the Bay Area during 1968. For a couple of years these groups formed the nucleus of women's liberation. According to sociologist Deborah Goleman Wolf, there were over 60 such groups in 1970 San Francisco.⁹³ Together, in groupings of six to twelve, women worked to "think independently of male supremacist values" and to "understand not only the ways this society works to keep women oppressed but also ways to overcome that oppression psychologically and socially."⁹⁴ While the small group would continue to be a central component of feminism, in 1972 and 1973 movement women began to put more energy into "defining the political projects" that would "transform social institutions."⁹⁵ The San Francisco chapter of the National Organization for Women (SF NOW) arrived in the bay at the same time, an outgrowth of the state chapter convened in 1967. By seeing itself a part of the broader women's community and working to foster organizational relationships, SF NOW helped to shape the landscape of

⁹² Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell*, 99.

⁹³ Deborah Goleman Wolf, *The Lesbian Community*, 66.

⁹⁴ Pam Allen, *Free Space: A Perspective on the Small Group in Women's Liberation* (New York: Times Change Press, 1970), 8; Deborah A. Gerson, "Making Sexism Visible: Private Troubles Made Public," in *Ten Years that Shook the City: San Francisco, 1968-1978*, Chris Carlsson ed. (San Francisco: City Lights, 2011), 170-182.

⁹⁵ Berkeley Women's Liberation, "'no title,'" *It Ain't Me Babe I*, no. 1 (January 15, 1970): 2.

feminism in the city.⁹⁶ Lesbian participation in and cooperation with the cities new feminisms would be challenged by homophobia, as explored in chapter 2. But the thriving world of women's activism in the Bay Area was an important component of the emergence of lesbian feminism.

Chapters and Periodization

The Daughters of Bilitis introduced the idea of a separate lesbian politics nearly fifteen years before the lesbian feminist movement began. It began as a social group in 1955 but transformed rather quickly into an advocacy organization seeking to help lesbians adjust to the world and the world to lesbians. I begin this study with the Daughters because they pioneered the work of lesbian organizing, thus laying the foundation upon which lesbian feminism was built. As I explore in chapter 1, DOB was part of the homophile movement, a female counterpart to a movement of organizations dominated by men. Through the 1960s the group became increasingly pulled towards the women's movement as its natural political ally. This shift alone was not enough to mark the emergence of a lesbian feminist movement, however. In part this distinction is one of ideological allegiance as DOB grew out of gay politics while lesbian feminism was wholly woman-identified. And while the national body was increasingly feminist identified, membership and individual chapters varied widely in their political positions. Still, the Daughters' years of lesbian-centered activity made it a pioneering example from which lesbian feminists drew.

Gay women around the country shared similar experiences of isolation in gay and feminist politics which facilitated a near simultaneous emergence of a separatist lesbian feminism. It emerged out of local events in cities and towns around the country but would

⁹⁶ Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell*, 97-102.

become part of a shared politics through the early 1970s. Such activity marked the first phase of lesbian feminism, between 1969 and 1973. Their first step was to craft an affirming understanding of their own identity and to situate it within a theoretical framework that acknowledged gender and sexuality as intertwined components that shaped their oppression. Through this work lesbian feminists advanced the work begun by the Daughters of Bilitis to build a shared sense of purpose with their gay sisters. As they experimented with women-centered politics, lesbians attempted various coalitional activities and found that only a separatist path would ensure adequate attention to the vilification of lesbian sexuality. Lesbian feminists considered the political implications of their identity and determined that lesbian sexuality was a source of personal liberation as well as societal transformation.

A new, lesbian-centered sexual politics appeared in the final months of 1969 as lesbians combined the insights gleaned from diverse activist experiences, particularly in the homophile movement, the women's movement, and gay liberation. In the San Francisco Bay Area this first phase of lesbian feminism grew out of the work of Gay Women's Liberation (GWL). This is the subject of chapter 2. The small, diverse group of gay women who first formed GWL integrated gender and sexuality in their analysis of their oppression and developed the idea that lesbian identity was a powerful method of resisting patriarchy. They continued to recognize, as well, the myriad ways that racial, class, and other identities further shaped experiences of oppression and the pathways to liberation. By seeing homophobia as a product of a sexist society, lesbian feminists situated themselves in alliance with women's liberation. During the first years of Gay Women's Liberation members experimented with how to work within the community and how to implement their ideas. For a time they tried to collaborate with gay liberation and the women's movement only to experience ongoing sexism and homophobia. As their political theories

solidified and as they created a thriving community, however, it became clear that lesbian feminism could and should follow its own path. The small group became a thriving coalition of groups and activists engaging in political actions and experimenting with the potential of this new movement. Their own space and their women-centered ideology allowed them to experiment with the meaning of politics. Personal empowerment and building alternatives to hierarchical and oppressive structures functioned centrally in this time as lesbian feminists considered what the revolution might look like and what type of future they hoped to create.

This early experimentation began to give way to “project activism” after the first few years. Once lesbian feminists had a clear understanding of women-identification and once they were well-situated in established communities they moved on to considered how to best channel their political ideals into revolution. They focused their energy on building institutions that could serve the needs of women and expand activists’ skillsets. These endeavors were experimentations in what it meant to build structures entirely free of male support or participation. This approach to feminist politics shaped the building of Lesbian Nation, the second phase of the lesbian feminist movement.⁹⁷ The 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference marked its beginning. Participants witnessed the diversity of interests and political positions at play within the movement. The heated debates of the event made clear both the passion and the potential for conflict that was possible among lesbian feminists grappling with moving their politics forward. Project activism allowed lesbians to pursue their separatist politics and contribute to the lesbian movement while not having to compromise their varied political positions and interests.

⁹⁷ The term comes from Jill Johnston’s book *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*. In it, she makes a case for lesbian feminist separatism as the path to liberation. I detail Johnston’s arguments and the meaning of the concept fully in chapter 3. This term was not universally used within the movement and was one of many ways to describe women-identification. But I use it here as a shorthand for the height of the movement in which a vision of bringing about a revolutionary woman-centered world seemed most possible.

In the Bay Area one of the primary manifestations of Lesbian Nation was the women's bookstore. Chapter 3 traces the lives of three women's bookstores that acted as hubs of lesbian feminist activity and women's community at mid-decade. The first, Information Center Incorporate: A Woman's Place, grew directly out of the activism of Gay Women's Liberation and quickly became a central site of Bay Area feminist activity. Yet it was a distinctly lesbian feminist project, run by a lesbian feminist collective and designed to be a stridently woman-only space. Feminists from around the Bay Area made it a priority to spend time here, even when that required an hour or two of public transportation, each way. Women also traveled from around the country to visit the bookstore and train with its bookwomen and with the Women's Press Collective, which ran out of the back of the store. In 1974 Full Moon Coffeehouse and Bookstore joined the scene. While the bookstore was an afterthought, and a small one, the Full Moon functioned much in the same way that ICI did and thus warrants consideration alongside it. This space also held significance as one of the few places in the Castro dedicated specifically to gay women. Old Wives Tales opened in San Francisco in 1976, the founders understanding that bookstores were so pivotal to women's community that the Bay Area could certainly support another. Opened in the growing lesbian enclave that centered on Valencia street, Old Wives Tales would become the epicenter of lesbian community in San Francisco proper. Each of these stores relied heavily or solely on lesbian labor. The degree of separatism and the structure of authority varied in each, but none would have functioned without the commitment of lesbian activists. Looking to these bookstores exposes the role of lesbians in supporting local women's community and the role of California's gay women in building the networks of Lesbian Nation.

The thriving network of feminist activity built in service of Lesbian Nation suggested that its revolutionary potential was limitless. Towards the last years of the seventies, however, it

became clear that the euphoria of their accomplishments could only keep conflict and trouble at bay for so long. For a time lesbian feminists were able to immerse themselves within women's community and continue their work of empowering women and building institutions they believed would carry liberation forward. Women's culture was thriving; never before had women had so many options to be with and celebrate their sisters (outside of the home). Ideas of women-identification spread widely through project activism and helped women explore lesbianism as never before. The women's movement finally indicated support for and inclusion of lesbians as full and equal participants within women's liberation at the National Women's Conference in 1977. The unity of this conference and their success in outfoxing Phyllis Schlafly's attempt to make it a demonstration of conservatism left feminists feeling as though anything was possible. At the same time, however, cracks began to appear and the coming years proved to be much more complex. Events of 1977 drew lesbian feminist attentions outward as new attacks on women's and gay rights prompted recognition that separating from mainstream culture did not provide protection from conservative backlash. The ideals of Lesbian Nation indication that a movement need not specifically target state power to bring about revolution. By this point it became increasingly clear they could not escape it and were pulled into political campaigns necessary to combat attacks on the newly visible queer community. In these years lesbian feminists also struggled with the long term utility of "women-identification" and increasing pull between ideals and survival.

Olivia Records, the subject of chapter 4, was a site for debate over structure, longevity, representation, inclusion, and values of the women's movement. In these years they began to incorporate structures previously deemed products of a patriarchal society and thus anathema to the movement. Feminist businesses were increasingly a subject of debate within the lesbian

feminist and feminist movements during this period. Some rejected the idea that anything following a capitalist model could be feminist. Yet the women engaged in these projects believed that they could run businesses in a way that empowered women, provided employment free of oppression, and created services and products women needed. Olivia Records, the first and largest women's record company, and one of the movements most well-known feminist businesses, was at the center of these debates. The collective began in 1973 in Washington, D.C., but relocated to California in 1975. Two years in Los Angeles ended with a move to Oakland at the end of 1977. This move coincided with the company's most successful and productive years. Women-loving women created innumerable pathways to and spaces for women to embrace lesbianism as a valid way of life. Increasingly, however it was unclear that this new generation of queer women was prepared to take up the lesbian feminist struggle.

A Note on California

The San Francisco Bay Area was not the only place where lesbian feminism flourished in California. A number of foundational groups, events, and projects scattered the state. Los Angeles served as the Bay Area's counterpart in southern California but activity also flourished in cities such as Sacramento, San Diego, and Santa Cruz. In the most remote reaches of the state, too, gay women joined together and experimented with life separate from patriarchal institutions. Local conditions shaped the nature of this activity but as with the national network, California lesbian feminists were bound together and shaped each other's trajectories. The lesbian feminism of San Francisco is in some ways incomplete without the stories from its sister city. Women traveled north and south for conferences, concerts, and consciousness-raising throughout the decade. Pairing the narratives of these cities would also strengthen arguments as to the important role played by California women in establishing lesbian feminism and carry it through the 1970s

as a distinct social movement. As such, I take a moment here to note briefly some of the activism of southern California lesbians.

During the first phase of the lesbian feminism (1969-1973) the Los Angeles activity flowed through the Gay Women's Intergroup Council. The group organized two of the most important events of these early movement years and demonstrated the ways in which lesbian activism knit together the pre- and post-Stonewall years. The Los Angeles chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis, the Gay Women's Service Center, and the Lesbian Feminists composed the coalition. L.A. DOB was dormant for some time in the late 1960s but it once again advertised a contract address by the August/September 1969 issue of *The Ladder*.⁹⁸ New, younger members provided much needed energy and by the summer of 1970 they began to publish a newsletter that would become an independent, nationally read lesbian feminist publication.⁹⁹ At the same time, local activist Del Whan established the Gay Women's Service Center, which functioned as a groundbreaking and pivotal space for lesbian activity in the first years of the seventies.¹⁰⁰ As was happening in New York and San Francisco, Lesbian Feminists grew from women who departed their gay brothers. Women of L.A.'s Gay Liberation Front left to form Gay Women's Liberation. As their politics emerged so did their name and by 1971 they became the Lesbian Feminists of L.A.¹⁰¹ The groups held distinct politics and disparate origins but realized their commonality in separatist organizing. This prompted regular community meetings that formalized as the

⁹⁸ Back cover, *The Ladder* 13, no 11/12 (August/September 1969), 50.

⁹⁹ Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 171.

¹⁰⁰ Stuart Timmons and Lillian Faderman, *Gay LA*, 170-171; Yolanda Retter, "Lesbian Activism in Los Angeles, 1970-1979," *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*, Joseph A. Boone et. al., eds. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 199. These sources offer two different dates for when the center opened.

¹⁰¹ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.*, 173-185.

Intergroup Council to better enable communication and for “possible mutual support.”¹⁰² Their cooperation helped to weave together lesbian feminist activity in Los Angeles. It also brought together women from around the state with the 1971 Gay Women’s West Coast Conference and from around the country with the 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference.

Los Angeles also became home to the nation’s longest running lesbian feminist publication. *The Lesbian Tide* helped to knit together lesbian feminism within Los Angeles and to bring these women into conversation with others around the country. It began in August 1971 as the newsletter of the Los Angeles chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis but it soon became clear that not all of the ideas published within reflected the homophile organization. Members also felt that an “organizational newsletter” limited their ability to “speak to the movement nationally” given that DOB was no longer the only lesbian organization or the primary mouthpiece for lesbian politics.¹⁰³ The women publishing *The Tide* separated from DOB and created a publishing collective, making the magazine itself their site of activism.¹⁰⁴ After the West Coast Lesbian Conference and the end of the Intergroup Council, the Tide collective became a significant force in coordinating southern California lesbian feminism. By the second period of the lesbian feminist movement the collective built strong circulation numbers and became the nation’s most important lesbian publication. California was thus home to one of the most important ways for the movement to communicate during its height.

Finally, in the last years of the 1970s Los Angeles was home to a short-lived attempt to create the National Lesbian Feminist Organization. After the National Women’s Conference at the end of 1977 a group of southern California lesbian called for a 1978 meeting with the hopes

¹⁰² Jeanne Cordova, “Gay Women Together,” *LA DOB Newsletter* (March 1971), 4.

¹⁰³ Barbara Gehrke, “Our 4th Anniversary,” *The Lesbian Tide* 5, no. 1 (September/October 1975): 16.

¹⁰⁴ Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 180.

of creating a vehicle through which to present a unified voice for lesbians. It was, in many ways, an effort to merge a separatist lesbian feminist ethic with a more liberal feminist political model, which speaks to the realization that the political landscape was changing. Or, more realistically, it grew from a realization that producing change required a visibility and a cohesiveness that was not well met by the structureless, non-hierarchical, grassroots, and separatist model that typified lesbian feminism since it had surpassed DOB as the voice of lesbian politics and culture. Out of these efforts grew the National Lesbian Feminist Organization (NLFO) as a “feminist platform” to address “the oppressions of lesbians in all of its manifestations” which included “discrimination based on sexual preference, sex, race, class, age, and physical disability.”¹⁰⁵ Lesbians of color were central to this planning and founding documents established strict guidelines to ensure their equitable representation. Through 1978 and into 1979 NLFO activists produced a newsletter, started ten chapters around the country, and developed grand plans for how this body would grow. It failed to gain momentum, however, and faded away by end of decade. Still, its vision was an important one that spoke to what lesbian feminism accomplished in its first decade and what many of its activists would continue to work towards in the years and decades to come. At the founding conference delegates approved the following statement of purpose:

Be it resolved that we declare that the purpose of this organization is to act on a feminist platform which deals with the oppression of lesbians in all of its manifestations.

Be it further resolved that we see these manifestations as including, but not limited to, discrimination based on sexual preference, sex, race, class, age, and physical disability.

Recognizing that lesbians are oppressed and invisible in this society where women-hating is the norm;

¹⁰⁵ “The Official Written Record of the Founding Convention of the National Lesbian Feminist Organization,” National Lesbian Feminist Organization Records (Collection 1944), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

Recognizing that there is a need to achieve equal rights and legal protections for all lesbians;

Recognizing that there is a need to educate lesbians and the general public as to the social, political, economic, and racial oppression of lesbians;

Recognizing the need for developing lesbian culture;

Recognizing that all women have many aspects of their lives, situations, and struggles and that women have multiple facets to their identities;

We therefore unite as the National Lesbian Feminist Organization.¹⁰⁶

In this resolution the women of NLFO demonstrated just how far lesbian feminists had come and the ground yet to cover.

¹⁰⁶ The Official Written Record of the Founding Convention of the National Lesbian Feminist Organization, March 17-19, 1978, Los Angeles, California, Box 1/3, National Lesbian Feminist Organization Records (Collection 1944), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

Chapter 1

Daughters of Bilitis

In the final days of summer 1955, eight women came together in a San Francisco home with plans to create a private lesbian social club. More formal than a friendship network, they gathered every week for a month to discuss format, name, bylaws, and membership guidelines before holding the first official meeting of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB).¹ Opposing visions of DOBs purpose quickly became apparent. Conflict erupted over dress and gender roles, relationships with heterosexual allies and gay men, and the level of secrecy they should practice. The group splintered and the few who remained wondered whether it might be time to give up the exercise altogether. Instead, they decided to make an earnest effort to create an organization that would aid lesbians in the work of accepting themselves, creating community, and functioning in a society replete with homophobia, sexism, and Cold War conformity. These women set about establishing a newspaper, office, library, and full calendar of events. In the first issue of the group's publication, *The Ladder*, president Del Martin urged lesbians to embrace "the solidarity of a cooperative front" so that they might do away with "the evils of ignorance, superstition, prejudice, and bigotry."²

¹ Though commonly pronounced "Bill-EYE-tis," members decided on the pronunciation "Bill-EE-tis" as they thought the former "sounded like a disease." They selected the title from Pierre Louys *Songs of Bilitis*, a collection of poetry honoring lesbian relationships. A recording of *Songs of Bilitis* which they eventually found confirmed this pronunciation. Phyllis Lyon as quoted in Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2006), 2-3.

² Del Martin, "President's Message," *The Ladder* 1, no 1 (October 1956): 7.

The Daughters of Bilitis laid a foundation of lesbian empowerment while navigating the realities of the postwar years. DOB functioned as a process through which lesbians explored existing interpretations of homosexuality and found their own voices. The organization's statement of purpose outlined the need for adjustment of the "sex deviant" and "education of the variant." Daughters began with the terms available to them – those offered by medical professionals and scientific literature.¹ They endeavored to meet women where they were, most of whom carried shame and fear due to a society that insisted homosexuality meant disease and sin. Daughters deployed language that allowed them to navigate communication with their multiple audiences.² But from the start its leadership positioned DOB as an agent of change. The statement of purpose also called for the "investigation of the penal code as it pertains to the homosexual, proposal of changes to provide an equitable handling of cases involving this minority group, and promotion of these changes through due process of law in the state legislatures."³ This was not the radical purpose envisioned by gay liberationists at the end of the 1960s but it was a bold statement at a time when the federal government purged gay and lesbian employees and law enforcement officials faced few restrictions in policing queer subjects. For

¹ Typically, the only information available to those seeking about knowledge about homosexuality was that to be found in medical research. Through the early decades this growing body of research turned homosexuality from an act one engaged in to an identity that defined a person. How these professionals spoke about sexual identity initially shaped the language of public lesbians. In the early pages of *The Ladder* (see volume 1, issue 1, for example) terms such as "invert" and "variant" appeared regularly. See John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, Second Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 17-22. For work on the role of medicine in shaping sexuality see Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

² DOB's mission statement details their commitment to internal and external communications. Of their four goals outlined on in the first pages of each issue of *The Ladder* the first was "education of the variant" and the second was "education of the public." See "Daughters of Bilitis—Purpose," *The Ladder 1*, no. 1 (October 1956): 4.

³ "Daughters of Bilitis—Purpose," *The Ladder 1*, no. 1 (October 1956): 4.

women trying to live as lesbians and safeguard themselves from the myriad threats of the period, any public affirmation of lesbian identity was a radical act.⁴

From the beginning, DOB fostered feminist consciousness by exploring how sexuality *and* gender shaped lesbian experiences. It brought gender analysis into the homophile movement and insisted upon its centrality to understanding the experiences of gay women. Martin situated DOB's work within the context of American feminism, explaining, "it has been only...through the courageous crusade of the Suffragettes and the influx of women into the business world, that woman has become an independent entity, an individual with the right to vote and the right to a job and economic security. But it took women with foresight and determination to attain this heritage which is now ours." She urged her contemporaries to claim "the heritage that awaits" by leaving the closet for a life as a public, engaged lesbian citizen.⁵ It took the Daughters many years to regularly use the term "feminist." But feminist sensibilities ran throughout their earliest days of activism in the ways they theorized about the position of the lesbian in society and brought gay women together. A closer look at the diversity of member voices, the range of organizational campaigns and events, and the historical realities of the fifties reveals an organization that was politically engaged and feminist in nature. Building lesbian community in private and public spaces empowered lesbians to be themselves. Through the opinions voiced in their publication, the events they hosted, the membership policies they established, and the interactions with male allies, they consistently demonstrated the importance of considering gender and sexuality as identity categories shaping the lesbian experience.⁶

⁴ Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman*, 20th anniversary ed. (Volcano, CA: Volcano Press, 1991), 224.

⁵ Del Martin, "President's Message," *The Ladder* 1, no. 1 (October 1956): 7.

⁶ Historian Marcia Gallo has well documented the history of the Daughters of Bilitis as a significant force in the homophile movement in her book *Different Daughters*. She carefully charts the national body and local

Seeking a Lesbian History

Innumerable factors determined if, how, and when mid-century lesbians were able to understand, name, and experience their homosexuality. World War II eased social norms that informed policing of proper gender and sexual behavior, fostering the growth of lesbian identity and community. The postwar years, however, witnessed efforts to reinvent a conservative American domesticity. Whatever freedoms gay women settled into during the war, they faced an increasingly hostile society with the rise of the Cold War years. Those individuals who acknowledged their homosexuality and who created community in order to build relationships provided a bold and important point of transition in the history of lesbian culture and liberation. Recognizing and naming lesbianism made it possible to develop a sense of shared identity necessary to lay the foundation for lesbian rights activism. The dual existence of Cold War repression and growing civil rights challenges in the 1950s created conditions that pushed a number of lesbians to think of their sexual identity within a political framework. Women who publically embraced their sexuality made lesbianism visible in a way that inspired others to do the same. These efforts provided the foundation of lesbian collectivity crucial to future activists. For in order to envision gay political organizing, there first needed to exist gay subjectivity and collectivity.

World War II created many conditions that supported a new world of female homosociality. Civilian and military labor needs brought thousands of women together in the close quarters of urban cities and military barracks. Women composed the majority of civilians

chapters as they created the lesbian rights movement. In a follow up article she more fully framed members of the Daughters of Bilitis as providers of “an unabashed if unnamed feminist perspective.” I build upon her work in this chapter. This story of DOB is an important one in acknowledging California as a significant site of the rise of lesbian feminism, in disrupting the divide placed between the homophile and liberation years, and in demonstrating that lesbian feminism has distinctly lesbian roots (rather than simply gay male and straight feminist ones). Further, I argue here that it was also a site that fostered feminism in a period typically believed to be characterized by a lull in feminist activity. Marcia Gallo, “‘I’m Glad as Heck That You Exist’: Feminist Lesbian Organizing in the 1950s,” *Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985*, ed. Kathleen A. Laughlin and Jacqueline L. Castledine (New York: Routledge, 2011), 48.

who migrated to industrial centers to find employment in war industries. Women left home, lived without the support of fathers or husbands, and moved about relatively free of male supervision. National survival during the war necessitated the easing of gender boundaries thus creating unique opportunities for women as a whole. It was this shift in gender dynamics that helped women come together and relate in new ways. Migration in the name of national service, coupled with the call for men's service abroad, made it less questionable for women to live independently or with other women. In port cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles the environment of wartime permissiveness that created new opportunities for women's culture left a mark long after the war as many civilians and soldiers stayed in these cities after the war.⁷ The centrality of changing gender norms in empowering lesbian experiences during the war years foreshadowed the lesbian feminist framework activists would soon begin to develop.

In these wartime spaces, many women found new conditions that allowed them to build queer lives. Those women who already embraced a queer sensibility at the onset of the war often used wartime employment to build lesbian-centered lives. Relocation to large cities allowed them to explore their sexual desires under the cover of homosocial or urban anonymity and embrace the opportunities to live independent of male support. For those women who did not know how to make sense of their same-sex desires, these environments provided a wealth of information and opportunity. Suspecting she was "uniquely criminal" for her attraction to women, Rita Laporte sought information in her college library, with no satisfaction. She found joining the army in 1943 "more helpful than the library," falling in love and learning "that I was

⁷ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 31; Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 12-14; Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 41-42.

not unique.”⁸ Still others, women who never before experienced queer feelings, found in these homosocial spaces a new desire to explore same-sex relationships. Having places in which to come together allowed lesbians to realize they were not alone.

Where lesbians found one another in any significant numbers, they had the opportunity to build community. Lisa Ben, in her personally published *Vice Versa*, said of the time, “Never before have circumstances and conditions been so suitable for those of lesbian tendencies.”⁹ Lesbian scholars Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis cite women’s overall freedoms during the war years as the most crucial to this suitability. Their newfound independence, along with new dress standards, provided unprecedented cover for lesbian lives.¹⁰ As women lived and worked alongside one another they sought out camaraderie and ways to pass free time. Lesbians looked to service clubs, sports teams, and local bars to meet and develop relationships and, over time, develop queer community. Lesbian GIs, for example, “made the service clubs their home base” where they “talked about former lovers, pointed out other ‘dykes,’ cruised or were cruised, danced with each other, smoked and drank beer.”¹¹ Time spent in these environments helped these women learn that the love they felt for other women was, in fact, “lesbianism.” Migration and military travel established a network of connections that women maintained after the war.

⁸ Rita Laporte, “Living Propaganda,” *The Ladder* 9, no. 9 (June 1965): 21.

⁹ Lisa Ben, “Here to Stay,” *Vice Versa* (September 1947): 5. Lisa Ben (an anagram for “lesbian” and the pen name of Edythe Eyde) self-published *Vice Versa* as a lesbian newspaper. She typed as many copies as she could using carbon and office time at her secretarial job. It was then circulated hand to hand in the Los Angeles Area. Twelve copies each of 9 issues circulated through the city between June 1947 and February 1948. Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*, xxiii-xxiv.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹¹ Allen Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 102.

Many would choose to stay in or relocate to these cities at war's end in order to live amongst lesbian society.¹²

The relative permissiveness of wartime faced serious backlash as the United States sought to establish a sense of security in the early Cold War years. The attempts to curtail women's expanded freedoms during World War II created new challenges for lesbians just beginning to understand themselves. In an attempt to overcome the tumultuous war years and gain a sense of security amidst new fears, the United States strove to return to idealized conditions that never truly existed. Scholar Robert Corber explains that women could aspire to nothing greater than family life and as such, those who selected other life paths were "not truly female." The hegemony of such ideas faltered when one saw that the numbers of women in the workforce and higher education continued to increase during this period. Ideally, however, this foreclosure on "gender and sexual norms" functioned as a means "to discourage women from capitalizing on these social changes."¹³ Historian Elaine Tyler May explains that this social structure was vital to Cold War success: "the belief that American superiority rested on its booming consumer culture and rigidly defined gender roles became strangely intertwined with Cold War politics."¹⁴ Prioritizing the rights of returning (white male) soldiers meant that authorities suddenly expected all minority groups (people of color, women, and homosexuals) to give up any wartime gains. Not only were open homosexuals considered out of place in the idealized heteronormative domesticity in this repressive environment; they posed a critical threat

¹² John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 27-30; Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 122; Alan Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 243.

¹³ Robert J. Corber, *Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 16.

¹⁴ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 10.

to it. A society trying to recover from the loss and chaos of wartime exerted pressure from all directions to return to an imagined nuclear family ideal. Anyone who resisted posed a threat to a sense of national unity and recovery. Female independence made visible during the war suggested that women's sexuality was under control of no man. Thus, women who remained unmarried after the war seemed an overt threat to social stability. Fear of women's unleashed sexuality made those women not legally bound to men particularly threatening to postwar order.¹⁵

Paradoxically, efforts to restrain sexual deviance in the Cold War era helped move the country closer to the rise of the gay rights movement. In 1947 the federal government increasingly targeted homosexuals, purging them from government jobs and denying employment on the basis of sexuality.¹⁶ Government officials, spurred by anticommunist fervor, deemed gays and lesbians unfit for government service because they were sexual deviants of poor character and because they were subject to black mail by "espionage agents."¹⁷ Attempts by the federal government to root out and purge gay employees brought unprecedented national attention to the existence of homosexuality. This visibility provided another way for those people with queer desires to begin to understand themselves as holding a distinct sexual identity and having an affiliation with others similarly classified. Witnessing this unjust behavior also helped to politicize gays and lesbians. It made clear ways in which their private sexual activity made them publically vulnerable.¹⁸

¹⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1988), 16; 72.

¹⁶ Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 42-43.

¹⁷ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 42-43.

¹⁸ Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 42-43.

Women were much less likely than men to be subjects of these purges. This does not mean, however, that lesbians escaped scrutiny in the postwar years. Historian Margot Canaday argues that female military service in the early Cold War years provided a space through which government attention helped to shape the meaning of female homosexuality. Intensified military attention to lesbianism “brought that assemblage *into* homosexuality.”¹⁹ Female military service became suspect since it was no longer essential to national security. As their service became standard practice, the military worried about policing gender hierarchy. They did so through the threat of lesbianism. This military surveillance and the resulting purges actually placed servicewomen under greater scrutiny for a longer period of time, outlasting the lavender scare.²⁰ Canaday outlines how, in monitoring women for evidence of homosexuality, the military shifted from policing behaviors to policing a type of person, given lack of understanding of how women “expressed” homosexuality.²¹ In this way, women’s culture as a whole became suspect with women “as a class” facing policing when stepping outside of traditional roles and behaviors.²² These attitudes about the queer implications of female homosociality complicated lesbian lives. They also paved the way for the longstanding tensions between lesbians and straight women in the women’s movement. “Lesbian baiting,” accusing all feminists of being man-hating lesbians, was a commonly deployed tactic used to discourage their activism. It may have kept some women from joining the women’s movement but its larger impact was in convincing many straight feminists that the movement did not have a place for lesbians.

¹⁹ Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 178.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 178-180.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

²² *Ibid.*, 195.

The policing of homosexuality in the postwar years occurred through other institutions as well, the experience of which was often shaped by gender. Law enforcement increasingly targeted homosexuals through bar raids and sweeps of known public sex sites (often through the use of entrapment). These approaches largely targeted gay men, though lesbians were at times subject to raids.²³ Lesbian arrests were more likely to occur in the streets, with butch women targeted due to their visible deviance from female norms. Butch/femme couples in particular faced regular harassment and even violence from police and passersby as they were a public demonstration of women rejecting heterosexuality.²⁴ Physical violence and sexual assault at the hands of police also occurred.²⁵ Gay men and lesbians often lacked a full understanding of what was and was not legal but they were certainly aware of the possibility of police surveillance when participating in public gay culture.²⁶ They were also well aware of the positions and practices of mental health professionals regarding homosexuality. Medical texts provided a primary point of contact with information about presumably abnormal sexual desires. This literature both heightened personal anxieties over one's "abnormal" sexuality and helped gay men and lesbians discover that, at the very least, they were not alone.²⁷ For many homosexuals, direct interactions with mental health professionals meant prognoses of illness, forced

²³ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 70; 182-184.

²⁴ Lesbian feminists would come to view butch/femme couples as copying heterosexual dynamics and accused them of role-playing. This interpretation has been debated in the scholarship. What is clear is that these relationships made lesbianism uniquely visible during this era. Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 92; Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 185.

²⁵ Lillian Faderman, *Naked in the Promise Land: A Memoir* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 154-156.

²⁶ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 63-64.

²⁷ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 33-37.

commitment to psychiatric facilities, and painful treatments.²⁸ That these institutions were central targets of homophile activism speaks to the very real, negative impact they had on daily lives of gays and lesbians in the postwar years.

Practicing secrecy not only aided lesbians in avoiding contact with the homophobic law and health professionals but also in protecting one's day to day survival. For most lesbians maintaining a home meant disguising their sexuality from family or employer, sometimes both. Gay women spoke frequently of a dual existence, as expressed so succinctly by "Niki" in Minnesota: "I, like most others, live two lives, one for the benefit of the public and the other for myself."²⁹ A New York DOB member similarly described being "forced to live two lives," "one in our work and in public" and the other at home.³⁰ Relying on familial support, or simply hoping to maintain family bonds, typically meant not disclosing one's homosexuality. Gossip and shared anecdotes warned of "mothers and fathers who have ostracized their daughters, or rushed them to psychiatrists, or thrown fits of hysteria" which conveyed the message "vicariously, if not actually," that home was not "a protective, care-giving unit for Lesbians."³¹ Consider Reggie who explained that her father, upon finding her at a lesbian bar, "literally kicked and punched [her] fanny all up Main Street on the way home."³² Upon coming out at nineteen Melissa's mother had her arrested; this resulted in her having to spend "two weeks in a

²⁸ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 134-138; Ginny Vida, ed., *Our Right to Love* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 92.

²⁹ Readers Respond," *The Ladder* 4, no. 5 (February 1960): 23.

³⁰ "Readers Respond," *The Ladder* 3, no. 4 (January 1959): 21.

³¹ Sydney Abbott and Barbara Love, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), 29. See also, Karla Jay, "Coming Out as Process," in *Our Right to Love*, ed. Ginny Vida (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 28-37.

³² Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 59.

Catholic home and three and a half weeks in the Women's House of Detention."³³ Other women hid their queer desires from husbands. While some wives did not realize or understand their sexuality upon marriage, others opted into a heterosexual life through family pressure, fear of survival outside of the norm, or a desire to have children.³⁴ For those women choosing to make a life all their own, employment was critical not just to self-support but also to the social lives that allowed them to build community. Dressing properly and hiding information about personal life were critical components of keeping jobs and typically came instinctively to women. For those who resisted such restrictions, such as butch dykes, employment options were limited. In working class lesbian bar culture, hustling and sex work also figured into methods of survival.³⁵ Any participation in these spaces, however, jeopardized one's secrecy.

Lesbians of color had even greater barriers to navigate as racism combined with sexism and homophobia to police their behavior. There is little available research on lesbians of color and what does exist is limited primarily to black women. Scholar Rochella Thorpe has speculated that this is because their communities were not bar-based. Drawing on African American traditions, tending to their need privacy, and in response to racism among white lesbians, black lesbians commonly built their networks through and in house parties. Urban spaces did not necessarily offer the same cover for women of color; a small African American community or gay bars being located in black neighborhoods could be enough to deter black lesbian participation.³⁶ In her study of Detroit, Thorpe found that the lesbians of color she

³³ Karla Jay, "Coming Out as Process," in *Our Right to Love*, 35.

³⁴ For work on married lesbians see Lauren Gutterman, "'The House on the Borderland': Lesbian Desire, Marriage, and the Household, 1950-1979," *The Journal of Social History* 46, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 1-22.

³⁵ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 55-57; 96-104.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

interviews “described incidents of overt racism that made them feel unwelcome in predominantly white bars.”³⁷ In postwar years, this dynamic complicated community building. Rather than just showing up at a bar, black lesbians had to tap into what were designed to be invisible networks. If they were able to do so, “their choices of where to socialize could increase dramatically.”³⁸ Kennedy and Davis, in the pioneering study of the lesbian community in Buffalo, New York argue that black lesbians integrated previously segregated bars in the 1950s.³⁹ In Detroit, however, black lesbians’ greater attendance at bars began only in the 1970s with the opening of bars run by and for black lesbians.⁴⁰

Bars were the most readily accessible places to find lesbians. Theirs is a political history. From negotiating state authority in its many forms to hosting lesbian feminist meetings, from cloaking gender transgressions to fostering same-sex intimacy, bars are inseparable from a story of lesbian resistance. They were publically accessible but relied upon a degree of privacy in order to function. Once a woman realized she was “different,” she either had to face a life of isolation or make sense of myth, news, and rumor to build a queer existence. Gay bars were more common and women could be found there, but lesbian bars were critically important to building queer women’s community. While lesbians of all backgrounds and identity categories sought and made use of these bars, working class (usually white) lesbians were the majority of clientele and they shaped bar culture. Gay and lesbian bars “evolved in a culture tightly bound to sex trade and

³⁷ Rochella Thorpe, “A house where queers go’: African-American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940-1975,” in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 48.

³⁸ Rochella Thorpe, “A house where queers go’,” 44.

³⁹ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 113-115.

⁴⁰ Rochella Thorpe, “A house where queers go’,” 54.

prostitution” and in “relation to sexualized and racialized entertainment.”⁴¹ Those women intent upon maintaining respectability or safeguarding familial or employment relationships were therefore less likely to make bars the primary part of their social lives. This deviant and transgressive history would shape how homophile activists, and later lesbian feminists, responded to the bar scene (even as members continued to make use of them). Critiques of bar culture and of butch/femme relationships dismissed the important work they did in establishing the public visibility of queer womanhood.⁴²

Despite a window of community building and expanded possibilities for women who loved women during the 1940s, by the 1950s lesbians faced the harshest conditions in decades. While there had never been large-scale acceptance of lesbians, in the postwar era a new level of open persecution emerged. Private lesbian enclaves and subcultures existed in small numbers since the early twentieth century. They grew in size and scope during the war. In the era of repression, these communities proved vital to lesbian survival. The positive outcomes of gay and lesbian community building during the 1940s, however, provided government and law enforcement officials with greater knowledge of and access to these individuals. Conservative ideology of the era justified mainstream society’s efforts to expose, punish, and isolate lesbians and gay men. Homosexuals received the message from federal government’s purges of homosexual employees and police raids of gay bars that to be queer meant a life lived in shadows. In the face of such hostility lesbian subcultures remained but often became harder to

⁴¹ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); 70.

⁴² Lesbian feminists created spaces that functioned as alternatives to bars, yet they continued to occupy an important place in lesbian communities. This will be addressed in future chapters. For lesbian bar life see: Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town*; Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*; Josh Sides, *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

find. Women who discovered and embraced their lesbianism during the permissive years were well situated to continue to enjoy the social and cultural lives. Those coming of age or coming to lesbianism in the aftermath had fewer options. The repressive mood of this era encouraged an isolated life. This was a time when “suddenly there were large numbers of women who could become part of lesbian subculture, yet also suddenly there were more reasons than ever for the subculture to stay underground.”⁴³

The growth of community during the war could be curbed but not undone. The networks were set in place and women who experienced the comfort of friendships and partnerships were not likely to relinquish such pleasures. Lesbians who claimed public space, presented themselves in nontraditional ways, revealed their relationships, and organized politically all contributed to growing visibility of lesbianism. They were aided in an odd way by those conservative individuals and institutions seeking to suppress homosexuality. The most common public acknowledgement of gay and lesbian deviance during this period came in the form of repressive efforts to hide it: government purges, raids on bars that catered to gay patrons, publishing censorship, arrests for impersonating members of the opposite sex. While such actions relayed explicit messages about the deviant nature of non-normative sexualities, it also helped to spread information about the growing presence of queer men and women in American society. Lesbian liberation grew from this environment.

The Daughters of Bilitis

The Daughters of Bilitis became the nation’s first lesbian rights organization. As mentioned in the introduction, a small group of lesbians created it in the summer and fall of 1955 as an alternative to the gay bar scene. First it functioned as a San Francisco entity but within the

⁴³ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 157.

first few years the structure evolved to include a national body and a number of chapters around the country. The early membership included working and middle class women as well as women of color. The decision to add an educational component to their initial social priorities prompted DOB to build connections with other homophile groups. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon increasingly participated in other homophile activities and developed a more expansive idea of what DOB ought to be doing. In the summer of 1956 the group restructured and penned a statement of purpose that guided its work through the coming years. This caused a significant change in membership, with Lyon and Martin reaching out to those women they believed would be interested in working towards greater social change. With greater breadth of purpose the restructured organization established the following goals: educating both the “variant” and the public, participating in research to expand knowledge about homosexuality, and promoting change to laws that restricted the lives of gays and lesbians. As DOB grew and embraced the interests and needs of members it extended well beyond even these considerable goals, touching most every aspect of lesbian lives. Membership always remained relatively small but DOB established considerable reach across the country through local chapters and a monthly magazine.⁴⁴

Who were these women? DOB consisted of national and chapter leaders and communities of core activists, as well as a broader network of women who interacted with the organization through its publication, meetings, and events. Membership and active participation was limited by geography and by fears that association with DOB might jeopardize one’s privacy given that the vast majority of lesbians in this time remained closeted. Some participants felt secure enough to become public representatives of the lesbian cause while others used

⁴⁴ “Daughters of Bilitis – Purpose,” *The Ladder* 1, no. 1 (October 1956): 4-5; Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 1-20.

pseudonyms and took part selectively. DOB circulated a survey of membership in *The Ladder* in 1958 and reported on findings the following year. Respondents were primarily white, between 20 and 40 years of age, likely to have had college education, and held professional or clerical employment. There were women who had been (or even continued to be) married and those who had never been with men, those who enjoyed gay bars and those who avoided them, those who had entirely lesbian social networks and those who had mainly straight ones. Most felt well-adjusted. Few had children. The overall composition reflected the professional, respectable image DOB projected. Yet the external image did not entirely reflect participation. At functions and conferences women were expected to wear skirts and heels, but butch women were always a part of the organization. Just over a third who responded to the survey reported masculine identification in their relationships.⁴⁵ Shirley Willer (longtime participant and officer) described herself as a “big butch” and detailed her discomfort with having to dress in skirts and heels for public events such as conferences and pickets.⁴⁶ While women were careful to present a respectable image of lesbianism and in spite of pieces in *The Ladder* that passed judgement on gay women who performed in ways not traditionally feminine, DOB included women of various viewpoints and presentations.

DOB leaders worked to address the everyday obstacles lesbians faced. Practical assistance came in the form of research and outreach to professionals who could advise lesbians on their rights, whether in the workplace, encounters with law enforcement, or in dealing with taxes and insurance. The first issues of *The Ladder* foreshadowed content that ran throughout its early years. Editor Phyllis Lyon and *The Ladder* staff raised the issue of knowing one’s rights in

⁴⁵ “DOB Questionnaire Reveals Some Facts About Lesbians,” *The Ladder* 3, no. 12 (September 1959).

⁴⁶ Eric Marcus, *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights, 1945-1990 – An Oral History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 127.

the event of police raids and how to respond to law enforcement when facing arrest.⁴⁷ They facilitated support groups for lesbians raising children in their same-sex partnerships, of interest perhaps because Lyon's partner Del Martin had a daughter.⁴⁸ Special attention was given to surviving the workplace given that the basis of a woman's ability to live as she pleased depended upon her ability to support herself. Articles in *The Ladder* posed the question, "How Secure is your Job?" To answer the question DOB organized a discussion series with themes such as "Employment and the Homosexual."⁴⁹ While sometimes naïve, they attempted to reassure lesbians by explaining that by focusing on skills, fit for a given job, and proper presentation lesbians could generally sidestep the issue of sexuality.⁵⁰ Martin and Lyon highlighted the issue of employment when reflecting on early political positions of DOB. They explained, "If you read the *Ladder* you will discover...we damn well knew that we should be getting paid the same amount [as men]."⁵¹ In negotiating issues of safety, family, and financial security, these women articulated many of the issues that lesbian feminists would prioritize in their work of social change.

The Daughters initially welcomed any professionals willing to speak to them as a means of building an unbiased body of knowledge about lesbianism. They opened their meetings and pages of *The Ladder* to a range of voices to source as much knowledge as they could about the origins, meanings, and implications of homosexuality. Early on this meant facing a good deal of

⁴⁷ "San Francisco Police Raid Reveals Lack of Knowledge of Citizens Rights," *The Ladder 1*, no. 2 (November 1956): 5; "Citizens Rights," *The Ladder 1*, no. 3 (December 1956): 2-3.

⁴⁸ "Raising Children in a Deviant Relationship," *The Ladder 1*, no. 1 (October 1956): 9; "Raising Children in a Deviant Relationship," *The Ladder 1*, no. 4 (January 1957): 4.

⁴⁹ "How Secure is your job?" *The Ladder 1*, no. 5 (February 1957): 2; "Calendar of Events," *The Ladder 1*, no. 5 (February 1957): 11.

⁵⁰ "Job Hunting Doesn't Need to be a Problem," *The Ladder 1*, no. 6 (March 1957): 5-7.

⁵¹ Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, interview by Nan Boyd, December 2, 1992.

judgement. As they became increasingly empowered through the late 50s and early 60s, however, they asserted an active role in selecting who they worked with and demanding an active role in producing new information. In December of 1956 they welcomed psychotherapist Basil Vaerlen for a discussion on lesbian fears. While he explained that the key issue is how the homophile feels about herself and that it is a private matter no one ought to judge, he also urged those present not to “flaunt” their “way of life.” He further passed judgment by stating that “the true biological function of the female is to have children” and by not doing so “the lesbian is unfulfilled, and is hampering her health and happiness.”⁵² The reporting on this event includes little commentary or critique, other than calling the doctor’s statement about women’s place “provocative.” Yet in February 1957 a panel composed of mental health, legal, and religious authorities included a psychologist who asserted he had never encountered “any ‘happy’ homosexuals.” Audience members “rocked with laughter” in response and needled the doctor until he admitted that he had never had “any ‘happy’ heterosexual patients” either.⁵³ The 1958 DOB questionnaire marked an important moment in which lesbians began to assert their authority in making meaning of homosexuality. In the early sixties Daughters created a research committee and partnered with psychologists to collect “accurate information on the lives and backgrounds of lesbians.”⁵⁴ The head of DOBs research committee Florence Conrad defended the importance of research even as some homophile activists rejected any professional authority over homosexuality.⁵⁵ In 1969 *The Ladder* included a column titled “The Counsellor’s Corner”

⁵² “Third Discussion on Fear,” *The Ladder* 1, no 4 (January 1957): 5-6.

⁵³ Sten Russel, “The Searchers Probe: ‘The Homosexual Neurosis,’” *The Ladder* 1, no 6 (March 1957): 14.

⁵⁴ Florence Conrad, “New Research on Lesbians to Begin this Fall,” *The Ladder* 7, no. 9 (June 1963): 4.

⁵⁵ Florence Conrad, “Research is Here to Stay,” *The Ladder* 9, no. 10-11 (July/August 1965): 15-21.

in which readers could seek out professional advice.⁵⁶ Reports on the work and research of medical professionals never disappeared from the magazine but tone and response shifted. Engaging with this community over the years empowered lesbians to speak with greater authority as to the meanings of homosexuality. Increasingly, readers of *The Ladder* rejected the importance of medical authority altogether.⁵⁷

This type of work took place alongside the planning of the social functions so valued by participants since the founding of the organization. There were always women who saw DOB solely as a means of finding friends and lovers. Special annual events such as their New Years' Eve and Valentines parties were open only to members and (female) guests.⁵⁸ The St. Patrick's Day Brunch, however, brought women together with gay men as Mattachine members received special invitation.⁵⁹ Then there were those functions open to all who wanted to learn more about DOB or enter into a space where one could find lesbian company, including regular work parties and spaghetti feeds.⁶⁰ Members also brought their interests into DOB and expanded its range of offerings by proposing special interest clubs. At a business meeting in the San Francisco chapter, for example, member Dee "asked if D.O.B. might sponsor a rifle club." Her motion was seconded, to be approved pending ten members who paid N.R.A. membership.⁶¹ Whether through softball clubs, bowling nights, spring picnics, these activities supported lesbian

⁵⁶ Dr. Ruth M. McGuire, "The Counsellor's Corner," *The Ladder* 8, no. 9-10 (June/July 1969): 37-39.

⁵⁷ Marcia Gallo, *Daughters of Bilitis*, 45-48.

⁵⁸ "Calendar of Events," *Ladder* 1, no. 4 (January 1957): 8; "Calendar of Events," *Ladder* 2, no. 3 (December 1957): 18; "Calendar of Events," *Ladder* 3, no. 5 (February 1959): 21.

⁵⁹ "Calendar of Events," *Ladder* 2, no. 5 (February 1958): 16.

⁶⁰ "Calendar of Events," *Ladder* 2, no. 7 (April 1958): 20; "Calendar of Events," *Ladder* 3 no. 2 (November 1958): 21.

⁶¹ "Minutes, Business Meeting of 4/1/66," Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, 93/13, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

socializing and community building. But they also made lesbian community public. For some women this public coming together was a bold step. For others, these social activities were just one aspect of the DOB experience.

One event that merged the organizations various interests was the monthly “gab ‘n java.” First introduced in May 1957, they continued well into the 1970s, indicating their value and popularity.⁶² These informal discussions were particularly important spaces and brought in some of the organization’s largest attendance numbers.⁶³ Described variously as “an informal bull session,” a “monthly gabfest for women only,” and “an excellent chance to discuss problems in an informal atmosphere,” the gab n’ java provided a safe space in which women could explore the experiences and implications of their sexuality.⁶⁴ Del Martin explained that they “were really consciousness raising groups, but we didn’t have that language.”⁶⁵ In them, women went about the same type of work that feminists would do a decade later. Carol Hanisch, in her article that gave the women’s movement its tagline, argued that early feminist movement consciousness-raising sessions were “a form of political action” because they allowed women to discover that “personal problems are political problems.”⁶⁶ Gab n’ java’s allowed open lesbians to do just this. Certainly not every gab session was a galvanizing political experience. But the existence of a space that encouraged lesbians to speak openly about their lives with one another mattered. The

⁶² “Calendar of Events,” *The Ladder 1*, no. 8 (May 1957): 16; “Up-Coming Events,” *LA DOB* (June 1970): 6.

⁶³ Eric Marcus, *Making History*, 116.

⁶⁴ “Calendar of Events,” *The Ladder 1*, no. 9 (June 1957): 9; “Calendar of Events,” *The Ladder 2*, no. 4 (January 1958): 17; “Calendar of Events,” *The Ladder 2*, no. 9 (June 1958): 18.

⁶⁵ Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, interview by Nan Boyd, December 2, 1992.

⁶⁶ Carol Hanisch, “The Personal Is Political,” in *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*, ed. Shulamith Firestone (New York: Radical Feminist, 1970), 76.

sessions raised awareness for many participants, sometimes helping them get through another day and sometimes helping them take action to improve lesbian lives.

For some women these practical and social offerings met their needs while for others the Daughters offered a form of activism available nowhere else. As already discussed, the statement of purpose indicated plans to use the law for “an eventual breakdown of erroneous conceptions, taboos and prejudices.”⁶⁷ Leaders hoped that DOB could “be a force in uniting the women working for the common goal of greater personal and social acceptance,” as well as “encourage the women to take an ever-increasing part in the steadily-growing fight for understanding the homophile movement.” They situated their work within the homophile movement but emphasized that empowering queer women was the organization’s primary goal. By discussing the “the problems of the female homophile,” DOB worked to legitimize the idea that women might have different needs than their gay brothers. From this first publication they also critiqued the mostly male ONE and Mattachine, explaining that DOB offers the “feminine viewpoint” which they have had so much difficulty obtaining.”⁶⁸ The Daughters of Bilitis worked to empower a new, positive mindset among lesbians, arm them with knowledge, and provide an array of resources to help them combat fear, harassment, and discrimination. This activist language worked in appealing members ready to engage in social change, conservative and radical. San Francisco DOB member Billye Talmadge and her partner Shorty accepted an invitation to a meeting in 1956 because of the “possibility of really helping people.” She hoped that they might provide answers for those struggling to understand and “give them some sense of

⁶⁷ “Daughters of Bilitis – Purpose,” *The Ladder 1*, no. 1 (October 1956): 4.

⁶⁸ *The Ladder 1*, no. 1 (October 1956): 3. The title of this section is not legible.

who they were.”⁶⁹ When Talmadge answered the office phone and convinced terrified women not to choose suicide, she had a clear sense of her purpose as a member that extended well beyond her own needs. Other members emphasized the importance of building radical interpretations of DOB’s mission. Barbara Gittings believed that new lesbians needed “help to get the bigots off their backs and ways to meet other lesbians. They didn’t need to be taught.”⁷⁰ Regardless of whether lesbians came to DOB with any sense of their sexuality as being a political issue, social change and activist priorities were woven throughout the organization’s work.

Before delving further into DOB’s role in social movement history it is important to consider what it meant to individuals. It is impossible to overestimate how radically significant homophile groups were in the day to day lives of people who would had no other source of information about or point of contact with other homosexuals. In particular, by putting out a monthly magazine, DOB eased isolation for women around the country. These monthly arrivals acted as a “best friend” for a lonely reader in Wyoming who would have found life “unbearable” without them.⁷¹ For a Minnesota woman the “20 or 25 minutes” spent reading *The Ladder* each month served to “alleviate the pain of falseness that most of us endure.”⁷² “J.M.” expressed how “lonely and unhappy” her feelings for women made her. DOBs magazine introduced her to the “enormity of the subject” and thus “eased [her] burden’s considerably.”⁷³ “N.M.” in Baltimore found *The Ladder* to be of “great value” in understanding herself and other homosexuals.

⁶⁹ Eric Marcus, *Making History*, 74.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁷¹ “Readers Respond, *The Ladder* 8, no. 3 (December 1963): 25.

⁷² “Readers Respond, *The Ladder* 4, no. 5 (February 1960): 23.

⁷³ “Readers Respond, *The Ladder* 4, no. 7 (April 1960): 25.

Perhaps more importantly, she explained that “my parents have been reading each issue and it has helped our relationship in many ways.”⁷⁴ Helping these women know they were not alone was a remarkable achievement.

DOB created an opportunity for lesbians to claim agency in defining their sexuality and determining its meaning in their own lives. In so doing, its members set an example for lesbian feminist work that emerged by the end of the 1960s. The conclusions reached by women of the fifties, sixties, and seventies would vary within and across decades, but they were linked in their efforts to explore how both gender and sexuality shaped their lives. Throughout most of DOB’s existence the membership typically defined a lesbian as a woman who was no different from others except “in her choice of a love partner.”⁷⁵ This definition was not hegemonic, however, and a number of viewpoints circulated. While some expressions clearly reflected influence of legal or medical authority, others reflected a surprising pride and confidence. Even when women maintained a fear of deviance there was a strong emphasis on accepting oneself. Through the pages of *The Ladder*, as well as various meetings and events, queer women could understand themselves through relationships with others like themselves and find self-acceptance. For lesbians struggling to survive the isolation of a homophobic society, such expressions were revelatory and revolutionary.

Building National Reach

DOB grew as a grassroots institution by building local chapters and creating a virtual community through *The Ladder*. The monthly publication was particularly significant in that it became a vehicle for participation among those women who lived too far from DOB chapters or

⁷⁴ “Readers Respond,” *The Ladder* 2, no. 1 (October 1957): 29.

⁷⁵ D.M., “The Positive Approach – Editorial,” *The Ladder* 1, no. 2 (November 1956): 8.

for whom any known association with the group was too risky. Editor Phyllis Lyon included a “Readers Respond” section beginning with the second issue, providing a way for these distant figures to take part. Chapters in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and other cities expanded access to direct participation and facilitated greater familiarity with DOB’s work. Male-dominated homophile groups, media coverage, libraries, and bookstores intermittently supported outreach efforts. Even works like *The Grapevine: A Report on the Secret World of the Lesbian*, by sensationalist reporter Jess Stern, served to introduce women to the Daughters.⁷⁶ The surprising networks women developed in spite of an overwhelming desire to maintain secrecy facilitated DOB activity and eventually contributed to the rise of lesbian feminism.⁷⁷

Women created a virtual community through the pages of *The Ladder*. Letters, articles, and literary contributions came from each state, towns large and small, indicating the wide variety of readership and suggesting at least a degree of diversity in the viewpoints expressed within the publication’s pages. Subscription numbers of queer publications such as *The Ladder* remained small throughout the fifties and sixties but evidence shows that readership far exceeded such data. The mailing list grew from approximately 200 to 3,800 between 1956 and 1970. Lesbians commonly expressed fear over having their name on such a mailing list and receiving this material at home but many found alternative ways to stay connected.⁷⁸ Subscription numbers

⁷⁶ While *The Grapevine* is full of problematic descriptions of lesbians shaped by the biases of the period in which it was written, it described the Daughters as well-adjusted lesbians. Upon its publication DOB found itself “deluged with phone calls and letters.” Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman*, 55. See Jess Stern, *The Grapevine* (New York: Macfadden Books, 1965).

⁷⁷ I discuss connections between DOB and lesbian feminism throughout, but I’ll provide one example here of these ties. Just as *The Ladder* folded in 1972 a couple who met via Gay Women’s Liberation activity were beginning the work of starting the lesbian feminist journal *Amazon Quarterly*. Editors of *The Ladder* announced *Amazon Quarterly* in its final issues helping it to develop solid early subscription numbers. Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 237-238.

⁷⁸ So common was this fear that it needed to be addressed in *The Ladder*’s second issue and throughout its run. DOB president addressed it in her statement and the magazine’s editor Phyllis Lyon penned “Your Name is

do not account for the personal circulation amongst social networks, as was the case for M.H. and her friends in Minnesota: “The three sample copies which you sent (Oct.-Dec.) were enjoyed by the whole gang. They’ve been circulating around since I got them.”⁷⁹ Historian James Sears explains that the small numbers of the mailing list “masked its larger readership among women who passed copies from one to another or who held ‘*Ladder* parties’ to read and discuss the monthly essays.”⁸⁰ In Washington, D.C., one subscriber held *Ladder* parties attended by as many as thirty or forty lesbians to whom she would read aloud the publication.⁸¹ As local DOB chapters developed, organizers worked to get newsstands to carry the publication, purchases that also would not have been accounted for in the mailing list numbers. These efforts indicate the void filled by this lesbian publication as well as the difficulty in fully understanding just how far its influence spread.

The Daughters also used *The Ladder* to help them build chapters. Leaders listed calls for member organizers In February 1957 Martin penned an article titled “Why a Chapter in Your Area?” and reported that a Los Angeles chapter was taking shape.⁸² Expanding DOB so that more women had local points of contact was certainly a priority. They succeeded in this goal in 1958 in Los Angeles and New York. Chicago became number three in 1961, with others to emerge in the following years. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon traveled across the state and across

Safe!” to explain readers’ legal protections. Paradoxically, Lyon authored it under her pen name, Ann Ferguson. Obviously recognizing this contradiction, she announced Ferguson’s death two issues later. Ann Ferguson, “Your Name is Safe!” *The Ladder* 1, no. 2 (November 1956): 10-12; Phyllis Lyon, “Ann Ferguson is Dead!” *The Ladder* 1, no. 4 (January 1957): 7.

⁷⁹ “Reader’s Respond,” *The Ladder* 6, no. 5 (February 1962): 24.

⁸⁰ James T. Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 201.

⁸¹ Larry Gross, *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 28.

⁸² Del Martin, “Why a Chapter in Your Area,” *The Ladder* 1, no. 5 (February 1957): 7; “Daughters Hold Brunch in L.A. – Plans for Chapter Under Way,” *The Ladder* 1, no. 5 (February 1957): 10.

the country to help make this happen. Each chapter experienced ebbs and flows of activity, but in each city they created a nexus for lesbian community and activism. They extended DOB's reach, modeling the work began in San Francisco and developing new, community-specific strategies. Los Angeles DOB started strong thanks in large part to supportive relationships with San Francisco women. In 1962 it hosted the second national convention of the organization and was home to roughly a quarter of DOB members.⁸³ By the following year the chapter was on the verge of collapse and the recipient of words of support from leaders of the New York chapter.⁸⁴ The New York women hosted the 1964 convention and, by 1966 rivalled San Francisco in membership numbers.⁸⁵ The Los Angeles chapter reemerged at the end of the sixties, in time to contribute to the rise of southern California lesbian feminism. The San Francisco chapter was more stable than the others because it shared the city with the national body. When Shirley Willer took over national presidency in 1966, she recommitted the organization to chapter building and established five new ones during her two year tenure.⁸⁶ Ultimately, chapters surpassed the importance of the national body and in 1970 members voted to do away with the national structure entirely.⁸⁷

The growth of these chapters required clarification of organizational structure and created tensions even as it expanded DOB's capacity. Most significant of these divisions were the

⁸³ At the time of this conference, membership stood at 87. These numbers reflect those women who composed the activist core of chapters and paid full membership dues to having voting rights at local meetings and conferences such as these. It does not account for the much broader scope of women who attended events and participated in less consistent or formal ways. Membership was as follows: San Francisco, 43%, Los Angeles, 25%, National, 17%; New York, 15%. "Daughters of Bilitis Minutes of the Second General Assembly Meeting, June 24, 1962," Barbara Gittings Papers, 84-29, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

⁸⁴ Letter from Barbara Gittings and Kay Lahusen to Los Angeles DOB, Barbara Gittings Papers, 84-29, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

⁸⁵ "S.F. Greets 'Daughters'" *San Francisco Chronicle* (August 17, 1966): 4.

⁸⁶ Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 139; Eric Marcus, *Making History*, 132.

⁸⁷ Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 162-172.

ideological differences between east and west coast. The San Francisco Daughters shared the city with National headquarters. While on paper there was clear separation between the two entities, in reality a good deal of the labor needed to keep national running (putting out *The Ladder*, planning national events, and so on) fell to San Francisco members. This placed heavier workloads but also greater influence in the hands of Bay Area women. Organizational hierarchy was not the only issue, however. Ideological differences appeared by the mid-sixties. New York leaders believed the west coast remained unduly conservative. Barbara Gittings advocated closer association with increasingly radical factions of male-dominated homophile groups. She recalled, “It was the intellectual East versus San Francisco, where they had nice coffee-katches and all that, right? They felt a little bit intimidated, I think, by the East.”⁸⁸ Of these debates over the relationship between DOB and homophile men Shirley Willer explained, “The San Francisco chapter objected. The National board objected. Even some of our own members in New York objected.” Willer called national DOB (and by extension, San Francisco) “conservative” and saw the ruptures as a fight between “those who wanted to make noise and those who wanted to do things quietly.”⁸⁹ As will be discussed below, Bay Area women saw it differently. Such tensions certainly helped to bring about the end of the national structure (and the loss of *The Ladder*) but they expanded the possibilities of lesbian activity within local communities.

DOB in the Homophile Movement

The existence of a women’s only homophile organization made a significant statement about the gendered experience of homosexuality. When leaders first formed DOB as a social club they did not know about the existence of Mattachine and ONE, Inc. They quickly learned

⁸⁸ Eric Marcus, *Making History*, 121.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 133-134.

that these male-dominated groups had already set the homophile movement in motion. Sharing a sexual minority status, gay men and lesbians seemed natural allies with a shared goal of combatting discriminatory social forces. At a time of such hostility, even the knowledge of the various homophile counterparts scattered throughout the country surely instilled men and women with a much needed sense of solidarity. DOB often joined forces with their homophile brothers, the groups advertising each other's publications, sharing social functions, and coordinating national outreach. Yet the Daughters always maintained the importance of having their own organization. It took little time for them to convey why this mattered.

While the "coed" groups often claimed and at times demonstrated a desire to include women in their ranks, few lesbians occupied leadership roles or celebrated their male colleagues as strong allies. ONE, Inc. made the greatest effort to incorporate women and had a female editor in charge of its publication. An independent publication, ONE founders came up with the idea for this magazine through participation in the Mattachine Society. The small collective was the most progressive of homophile groups and "projected an image of defiant pride" in homosexual identity.⁹⁰ Women participated in the collective but this did not translate into a representative publication. In an article titled, "For Men Only?" a lesbian contributor asked, "how can a magazine written for the minority, disregard one half of that minority?"⁹¹ A letter to ONE after a full year of publication stated that thus far the "gay girl" had "been pretty much ignored" therefore excluding a "large percentage of the 'gay population'." That "the point of view from the 'gay girl' is rather different from the fellow," the author argued, made "a very good argument

⁹⁰ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 72-73; 108.

⁹¹ J.P., "For Men Only?" *ONE Magazine 1*, no. 8 (August 1953): 3.

for the necessity of including their element more in future issues of ONE.”⁹² A column titled “The Feminine Viewpoint” began partway through the third volume. While this move suggested an attempt to highlight lesbian voices, it also indicated that the publication was not doing a very good job of inclusion on the rest of its pages. The column did not last.⁹³ At times hostility replaced silence. Mr. A.C. critiqued both ONE’s efforts to reach out to lesbians and those lesbian voices that called for greater inclusion. To his mind the magazine was for both gay men and women and that any omissions were the result of lesbian laziness. He further critiqued the “drivel” submitted by “self-pitying femme readers” and postulated that “a fine percentage of fiction and poetry by gals” came in fact from “a feminine name [that] masks a male writer.”⁹⁴ Whatever the reasons for lesbians not contributing, ONE never spoke to or for the lesbian community with any success.

Such disregard for women’s voices extended beyond the page; Mattachine’s social and political priorities emphasized the needs of men. The Mattachine Society grew out of communist activism and the original structure modeled the Party’s cell-like structure. Founded in 1950, by 1953 its success in developing a number of chapters around California resulted in a significant organizational shift. It was restructured as “an aboveground organization” and redirected Mattachine towards assimilation, rather than celebrating a distinct gay culture.⁹⁵ Police entrapment was a particular source of contention between men and women. Lesbians recognized the dangers of and objected to police harassment, fearing bar raids and arrests while being

⁹² M.F., “Discussion, Anyone?” *ONE Magazine* 2, no. 2 (February 1954): 11.

⁹³ A female reader from New York wrote to ONE in 1957 critiquing the absence of lesbian voices and the disappearance of “The Feminine Viewpoint.” R.B. “As For Me,” *ONE Magazine* 5, no. 6 (June/July 1957):19.

⁹⁴ A.C. Galveston, “As For Me” *ONE Magazine* 5, no. 6 (June/July 1957):19-20.

⁹⁵ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 165-167; John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 75-84.

relatively free from entrapment campaigns.⁹⁶ *The Ladder* included information about what to do in case of arrest during police raids of gay bars. But they also resented the prioritization of this above all else and expressed frustration over behavior they believed brought undue police scrutiny. DOB member Shirley Willer recalled “controversy within DOB” among women who “resented working with the men” on such issues as bar raids because “it was the men, not the women, who were cruising the tearooms and getting in trouble with the police.”⁹⁷ Willer argued that “job security, career advancement, and family relationships” – roles influenced more by their gender than their sexuality – were of greater importance to DOB lesbians. In response Mattachine leader Foster Gunnison remarked, “A conference is not truly a conference unless...Shirley Willer breaks down in tears over DOB getting left out in the cold.”⁹⁸ According to Martin and Lyon, “Mattachine kept saying we’re co-ed, and you’re the segregated group” without acknowledging their role in this dynamic.⁹⁹ Lesbians and gay men did find functional alliances on a number of projects and in a number of groups that emerged through the 1960s but these types of conflicts within the core homophile groups made cooperation a fraught endeavor.

Lesbian activists were not silent about the sexism they experienced, even in these early days. Their vocal critiques of gay men’s misogyny reflected a feminist sensibility developed through the process of exploring the intersection of homosexuality and womanhood in their lives. At Mattachine’s first conference in 1959, national president Del Martin issued a scathing indictment of the homophile movement that was rife with feminist sentiment:

⁹⁶ John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 110-111.

⁹⁷ Shirley Willer, “One Angry Nurse,” *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights, 1945-1990*, ed. Eric Marcus (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 133.

⁹⁸ This particular exchange took place at the 1966 National Planning Conference of Homophile Organizations. Quoted in Toby Marotta, *The Politics of Homosexuality* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 52-53.

⁹⁹ Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, Interview with Nan Boyd, December 2, 1992.

First of all, what do you men know about Lesbians? In all of your programs and your 'Review' you speak of the male homosexual and follow this with – ho, yes, and incidentally there are some female homosexuals too and because they are homosexual all this should apply to them as well. ONE has done little better. For years they have relegated the Lesbian interest to the column called 'Feminine Viewpoint.' So it would appear to me that quite obviously neither organization has recognized the fact that Lesbians are women and that this 20th century is the era of emancipation of woman. Lesbians are not satisfied to be auxiliary members or second class homosexuals. So, if you people do wish to put DOB out of business, you are going to have to learn something about the Lesbian, and today I'd like to give you your first lesson.... One of Mattachine's aims is that of sexual equality. May I suggest that you star with the Lesbian? This would certainly be a 'new frontier in acceptance of the homophile'.¹⁰⁰

DOB's insistence on remaining a woman-only organization in the male dominated homophile movement was a testament to the early recognition that gender was an important factor in shaping the inequalities they faced. After only a few years of organizing, and several years before women's liberation would coalesce, leaders offered feminist criticism of even their closest allies. More than a decade of these exchanges well prepared many DOB women for greater allegiance to their feminist sisters at the onset of liberation politics.

Analysis of sexism's role in shaping the lesbian experience was not an activity limited to DOB leadership. Readers of *The Ladder* contributed to this thinking with increasing regularity through the sixties. In her second letter to the magazine playwright Lorraine Hansberry asserted:

"I think it is about time that equipped women began to take on some of the ethical questions which a male-dominated culture has produced and dissect and analyze them quite to pieces in a serious fashion. It is time that 'half the human race' had something to say about the nature of its existence. In this kind of work there may be women to emerge who will be able to formulate a new and possible concept that homosexual persecution and condemnation has at its roots not only social ignorance, but a philosophically active anti-feminist dogma."¹⁰¹

Linking "homosexual persecution" and "anti-feminist dogma" as measures that inhibit women's equality, Hansberry encouraged *The Ladder* readers to consider how "male-dominated culture"

¹⁰⁰ "Mattachine Breaks Through the Silence," *The Ladder* 4, no. 1 (October 1959):19.

¹⁰¹ "Readers Respond," *The Ladder* 1, no. 11 (August 1957): 30.

was circumscribing their lives as women *and* lesbians. That she was writing to DOB readers and members through this publication and calling upon “equipped women” suggests that she believed lesbians to be especially able to do so. Everyday readers also peppered the pages of *The Ladder* with similarly feminist thoughts, often in anonymity. A featured titled “Why Am I a Lesbian?” revealed a range of opinion as to why they loved women. For one contributor, lesbianism was a choice that allowed “freedom of expression” as a woman. She believed that “as a lesbian I have lifted the veil of repression imposed by society. As a lesbian I may be myself.” Another explained “I would suspect that a more likely factor leading to lesbianism would be the protest against domination by the male and the inability of the lesbian to emulate the female role as set forth by society.” Her sexuality functioned as a “protest against domination” and offered “a withdrawal from the heterosexual market-place of glamour and emphasis placed rather upon the independence of the individual and development of the full personality.”¹⁰² That women wrote in with such views indicates that before and outside of women’s liberation lesbians experienced their sexuality as a liberatory act.

It was DOB’s position in and response to the larger homophile movement that reflects some of the most overt feminist expressions. When they organized separately from men, lesbians made a statement that gender was a significant force in their oppression. Even when cooperating with male homophile groups, the existence of a lesbian-only organization indicated that gay women’s issues were just as important as those of men. Reflecting back on her time with DOB, lesbian activist Shirley Willer clearly identified why it mattered that the Daughters protect woman-only space: “the issues championed by militant homophile leaders had little potential for politicizing female homosexuals because they had little bearing on lesbians lives and because they ignored what was most responsible for the lesbians problems—discrimination based on

¹⁰² “Why Am I a Lesbian?” *The Ladder* 4, no. 9 (June 1960): 23-24.

sex.”¹⁰³ DOB maintained the position that lesbians had distinct issues and interests as women and remained insistent that the other organizations were male-centered. The feminist implications of this work would be visible to many future activists.

DOB as Women’s Movement

DOB fit well into the nebulous feminism that persisted between the ratification of the 20th Amendment (1920) and the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Nineteenth and early twentieth century women’s organizing culminated in suffrage. Rather than terminating there, however, it continued in the work of advocacy and reform organizations such as the League of Women Voters and the National Women’s Party (the latter maintaining its radical edge with unwavering support for the Equal Rights Amendment). Conflicts over race and class, present throughout women’s activism in the United States, created deep fissures among feminists, particularly once the shared goal of suffrage no longer served as a uniting goal. This sent feminist activity scattering in myriad directions rather than ending it altogether. Women of color continued on as leaders within their communities and shaped the burgeoning civil rights movement. Other women harnessed their roles caretakers of the home to assert power as mothers and as consumers. And still others formed women’s auxiliaries and harnessed the solidarity of unions.¹⁰⁴ Even without identifying as feminists or women’s rights advocates, activists who worked towards better lives for women ensured a continuation of feminist principles.¹⁰⁵ DOB entered into this world. As self-identified feminist voices emerged among lesbians, both external

¹⁰³ Toby Marotta, *The Politics of Homosexuality*, 53.

¹⁰⁴ Annelise Orleck, *Rethinking American Women’s Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 29-51.

¹⁰⁵ Nancy Felice Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1975* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women’s Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

to and within DOB, the organization began to engage more explicitly with lesbianism as a feminist issue. By the mid-sixties the Daughters considered how the concept was reflected in their work and how it would shape its path. Liberal and radical ideas rising from the women's movement eventually received attention in *The Ladder* and provided members with new interpretations of women's experiences. The availability of another set of political allies drove lesbian activists to further question the longstanding tensions with homophile men and consider whether straight women might provide a better option.

Glimmers of feminist sentiment in the pages of *The Ladder* foreshadowed a more deliberate feminist shift in 1967. That it reviewed Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* immediately upon its release suggests that Daughters were paying attention to the rise in women's activism. The reviewer, "NOLA," was a regular contributor to the publication. She situated the book in relationship to Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* thus demonstrating knowledge the major works of feminist literature. A succinct summary preceded an exploration of how the text might be of use to lesbians, asking "Is it possible that some women turn to homosexuality as an escape from being cast into a social stereotype which degrades their individuality and limits their activity at the point where it may begin to make an impact on the world outside the home?" NOLA makes meaning for the lesbian readership by arguing that the weight of societal expectations placed upon women so clearly laid out by Friedan not only restricted the lives of married women but also produced "an irresolute and therefore unsatisfactory lesbianism."¹⁰⁶ While Friedan would likely have bristled at such interpretation, the review made an important point about the ways in which the patriarchy affected all women, if in different ways.

¹⁰⁶ NOLA, "Book Review: *The Feminine Mystique*," *The Ladder* 7, no. 6 (March 1963): 10.

The feminist content was not always quite so explicit in taking the gender system to task but it highlighted recognition of gender and sexuality as dual forces in lesbian lives. In March of 1964 the news section “Cross Currents” reported on the work of the Presidents Commission on the Status of Women. According to the summary, the committee found evidence of discrimination against women which needed remedy by the courts but would also benefit from greater use of the vote by women.¹⁰⁷ Reviews of books like Jess Stern’s *The Grapevine* and Daniel Webster Cory’s *The Lesbian in America* highlighted that queer women had unique experiences which warranted their own studies.¹⁰⁸ Likely the first appearance of the word “feminist” appeared within *The Ladder* in the February/March issue of 1965 in the anonymously authored “I Hate Women: A Diatribe by an Unreconstructed Feminist.” The reveal of the first paragraph was not that the author actually hated women but instead hated “femininity.” The term “femininity” was similarly used in NOLA’s discussion of *The Feminine Mystique*. They relied on this term in order to speak to what the women’s movement would come to call “gender roles.” While attracted to women specifically for the feminine attributes, the author detested femininity as “a role society has thrust” upon women, making her hide attractive qualities such as “vitality, intelligence, [and] individuality.” Lesbianism was a form of resisting such a system, even when they failed to recognize it. The idealized vision of womanhood functioned as a form of exploitation and demanded a “Resistance movement.”¹⁰⁹ A reader, Mrs. J.I., responded to this article and discussed it in relationship to *The Feminine Mystique* as well as “the most articulate feminist of all time, Bernard Shaw.” J.I. suggested that the most important contribution DOB

¹⁰⁷ “Cross Currents,” *The Ladder* 8, no. 6 (March 1964): 19.

¹⁰⁸ V.P., “The Fourth Sex – The Lesbian,” *The Ladder* 8, no. 4 (January 1964): 4-5; F. Conrad, “The Lesbian in America,” *The Ladder* 9, no. 1 (October 1964): 4-7.

¹⁰⁹ “I Hate Women: A Diatribe by an Unreconstructed Feminist,” *The Ladder* 9, no. 5 (February/March 1965): 7-11.

could make would be “to explore the murky area of the feminine identity and the changed and changing relations between the sexes in our time.” The world could learn much from lesbianism as it “offers unique opportunity for two women to develop their best potentials without sacrificing their right to the basic satisfactions of love and companionship.”¹¹⁰ Amidst the homophile content, gender mattered.

Events of the 1964 national DOB convention indicated that by this time leaders were discussing the changing meanings of the organization. Members brought motions to the business meeting proposing changes to the titles of the organization as well as *The Ladder*. Barbara Gittings and Kay Lahusen, who had once been leaders in New York but attended this assembly as national (unaffiliated) members, brought a number of proposals before the body. The couple asked the Daughters to vote on changing the organizations name to “Alliance,” “Pro Tem Society,” or “Choice.” They cited members’ dissatisfaction with being “daughters” as the motivation behind these motions. Pro Tem, they suggested, demonstrated “the hope that eventually there will be no need for an organization like ours.” The other options may have been an indication of their growing allegiance with male homophile groups. Considered alongside their proposal that DOB create a “supporting membership for men,” this is a possibility. Choice is particularly compelling given the use this word would get in 1970s feminism. Might they have been suggesting homosexuality was a choice? For the magazine, they hoped to find a “more dynamic-sounding” name. By proposing “Dialogue” and “Counterpoint” they suggested that the publication functioned as in important space for debate (under Gittings editorship). “Catalyst” and “Vanguard” were even more suggestive offerings, demonstrating the hopes of Gittings and

¹¹⁰ “Readers Respond,” *The Ladder* 9, no. 9 (June 1965): 24.

Lahusen to take DOB in the direction of advocating greater social change.¹¹¹ The official minutes from this convention reflect only those motions that passed and thus left no record of what, if any, debate took place around these proposals.¹¹² That they were brought the floor, however, indicates that at least some discussion occurred as to the different possibilities that lay ahead for DOB.

In spite of Gittings contributions, DOB leaders felt that under her editorship *The Ladder* deviated from its focus on gay ladies. Feminist sentiments reached print but Gittings highlighted the perspectives of gay men. This reflected Gittings growing ties to gay activists.¹¹³ She advocated these relationships for several years, facilitating DOB's involvement in the East Coast Homophile Organization (ECHO). The founder and leader of New York DOB, Gittings and her partner Kay Lahusen left the chapter over ideological differences. Lahusen explained after they switched energies to *The Ladder*, "the character of the chapter has changed radically."¹¹⁴ They continued as members at large and Gittings made great improvements with the magazine during her three years at the helm. Readers commented through these years on the steady rise in quality, noting in particular the images, cover graphics, and overall polish.¹¹⁵ But others did begin to question content. J.C. of New York critiqued the emphasis on "clinical reports" that drew attention from the publication as "the mouthpiece of the Lesbian world" because they were

¹¹¹ Barbara Gittings and Kay Lahusen, Nominations and Proposals for DOB General Assembly 1964 from National Members Barbara Gittings and Kay Lahusen, Box 1/5, Barbara Gittings Papers, 84-29, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

¹¹² Daughters of Bilitis – General Assembly Meeting Minutes – 1964, Box 7/16, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹¹³ Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 131-132.

¹¹⁴ Kay Lahusen, Letter to New York Area Chapter and Members of the Governing Board, Box 1/16, Barbara Gittings Papers, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

¹¹⁵ For compliments on improved content as well as raves about the cover photography, see *The Ladder's* "Reader's Respond" sections in the following: issue 8, no. 10; issue 9 no. 3; issue 9, no. 5/6; issue 9, no. 9.

overwhelmingly “male oriented.” Writing from Virginia, Ann detailed being “put off” by “the emphasis on the homophile movement, with men writing about what men say at meetings.”¹¹⁶ Gittings’ final issue was the convention issue in August of 1966.¹¹⁷ It was clear she saw her ousting coming as she endeavored to meet the demands of national officers and asked that she be allowed complete her term as editor.¹¹⁸ Such requests were not granted. Little was made of this situation on record at the conference, other than noting the problems that the new editor would have to address.¹¹⁹ A period a temporary editorship followed and this flux was reflected in the overall quality of the magazine. The final issue of the year, however, indicated that change was coming.

Gittings departure from *The Ladder* spoke to the conflicts growing within DOB. It is not surprising this that after a decade, and in the context of a changing political landscape, that members might raise questions and suggest changes. Debates included membership in the East Coast Homophile Organization, the use of picketing as a political tactic, editorial policies and production practices of *The Ladder*, and organizational structure. Concerns over the use of picketing, for example, could not be separated from concerns over maintaining organizational independence, balancing the power of the national body and the chapters, and safeguarding adequate attention to lesbianism within a male-dominated homophile movement. Gittings and Lahusen did not find enough support for their vision to sustain their involvement, but this does

¹¹⁶ “Readers Respond,” *The Ladder* 11, no. 3 (December 1966): 26-29.

¹¹⁷ There is much to explore in these events. In addition to ideological debates, there is evidence of conflict over production. In July of 1965, for example, national president Cleo Glenn, along with Martin and Lyon, issued directives to Gittings about sticking to a production schedule citing complaints from subscribers. Letter to Barbara Gittings, Box 12/9, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹¹⁸ Letter to Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, Box 6/13, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹¹⁹ Minutes of the Fourth General Assembly: August, 1966, Box 7/17, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

not mean that the west coast disagreed with them on all counts. The New York chapter did ultimately ally itself with homophile men while the San Francisco chapter spent a good deal of time organizing social functions. But New York also enjoyed its annual covered dish dinners and weekly TGIF gatherings while San Francisco women worked closely with homophile groups (including the radical Society for Individual Rights) to build a gay voting bloc in the Bay Area.¹²⁰ As national officers, Martin and Lyon represented the body that set a policy against picketing, and yet in September of 1965 they joined the Council on Religion and the Homosexual on the picket lines. This being the case, the fight could not have been only a matter of organizational affiliations or political tactics.

Shirley Willer appears to have represented a middling position in these debates given that she was the membership's choice for national president in the summer of 1966. Willer supported work with homophile men and attended pickets; in spite of her discomfort with feminine clothing she attended the Mattachine organized demonstrations in the required skirt and heels. As president, she balanced an interest in remaining a part of the homophile movement with continued commitment to lesbian-only spaces. During her term she oversaw the founding of five new chapters around the country. She attended the National Planning Conference of Homophile Organizations but demanded that gay men recognize their sexism and make room for lesbian issues. In her interview for a book documenting the gay rights movement, Willer highlighted her

¹²⁰ The San Francisco chapter noticed a business meeting discussion of picketing as technique and membership in ECHO in July 1965. The following month they reported that New York and San Francisco voted to withdraw from the East Coast Homophile Organization for ECHO's failure to pass a resolution that would bar any activity that violated the policies of its member organizations. "Business Meeting," *Daughters of Bilitis San Francisco Chapter Newsletter* (July 1965): 1; "Business Meeting," *Daughters of Bilitis San Francisco Chapter Newsletter* (August 1965): 1. SF DOB's relationship with homophile men is visible in the newsletter as well. They discussed and debated level of participation with the Committee on Religion and the Homosexual, announced conversations with SIR members, and advertised events for both groups. "Business Meeting," *Daughters of Bilitis San Francisco Chapter Newsletter* (February 1965): 2; "Co-Ed Feature" *Daughters of Bilitis San Francisco Chapter Newsletter* (June 1965): 1. For New York events see, for example: "Calendar of Events," *Newsletter New York Chapter Daughters of Bilitis* (October 1965), 2.

ties to the homophile movement and commitment to picketing as well as the importance of seeing gay men and lesbians as united under the homosexual identity. Yet in her presidential address published in *The Ladder* in November 1966, she highlighted the specific needs of lesbians in their identity as women. She suggested that lesbians face greater discrimination as women than they do as homosexuals and that gay men have failed to demonstrate “any intention of making common cause with us” and would fail to stand by lesbians in the event they achieved their own goals.¹²¹ Her two year presidency would end in controversy at the disastrous 1968 convention as she tried to address critiques from every direction. But during her years as president she brought a flood of money into the organization through an anonymous donor, navigated a complex and disputed organizational structure, and maintained a commitment to lesbian-only organizing.¹²²

The events surrounding this period of conflict (1966-1968) marked a significant moment in the trajectory of the Daughters of Bilitis. By maintaining its distinct lesbian-centered identity the organization set itself on a feminist course. This spirit is made visible in the content shift visible in *The Ladder* under the leadership of Helen Sandoz. Willer’s presidential address graced the pages of Sandoz’ first issue and in the second the new editor referred to the statement as a sign of things to come. Reader “Ann” from Virginia expressed her joy in being a queer woman and distaste for the recent preponderance of male-authored texts in the magazine. She hoped instead that *The Ladder* should reflect that “of all women” it was lesbians who were “proudest of our sex.” Sandoz responded with a lengthy editor’s note to acknowledge that the reader voiced the very conflict DOB faced at that time: “Homosexuals are men. They do not seem to think of

¹²¹ Shirley Willer, “What Concrete Steps Can Be Taken to Further the Homophile Movement?” *The Ladder* 11, no. 2 (November 1966): 18.

¹²² Toby Marotta, *The Politics of Homosexuality*, 52-53; Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 119; 129-130; 139-144.

women (or Lesbians) as being homosexual, yet the law can and sometimes does so include us” (underline in the original). Lesbians could not ignore the world of a male dominated homophile movement given that lesbians shared much of their social and social persecution. Sandoz promised, however, that the coming issues would take up the tone and message of Willer’s address which many readers had asked for but which might be “more in some cases than they are ready for.”¹²³

Sandoz stayed true to her word; through 1967 and 1968 the emphasis on women grew noticeably. The January 1967 issue featured articles titled “A Lesbian Speaks her Mind” and “On the Superiority of Women.” The former emphasized how women experienced homosexuality differently from men while the latter was an admittedly poorly reasoned but emphatic call to arms for women to take on positions of power.¹²⁴ A better article appeared the following month, in which Dorothy Lyle addressed the prejudice that faced lesbians in employment because they were women.¹²⁵ In June of 1967 Sandoz published an editorial from Del Martin titled “The Lesbian’s Majority Status.” This bold statement for the magazine was all the more significant given Martin’s role within DOB. Whatever her formal position within the organization, she held great influence in how it functioned and how it was perceived. She argued that while lesbians have thought of themselves as partners in the homophile movement, this cooperation was the result of a false “bill of goods sold to us” and resulted in having to get “bogged down in the defense of promiscuity among male homosexuals.” It was time for the lesbian to recognize that she was “first of all a *woman*” (emphasis in the original). Martin argued that those issues of

¹²³ “Reader’s Respond,” *The Ladder 11*, no. 3 (December 1966): 28-29.

¹²⁴ Christine Cummings, “A Lesbian Speaks Her Mind,” *The Ladder 11*, no. 4 (January 1967): 3-5; Dr. Paul Snyder, “On the Superiority of Women,” *The Ladder 11*, no. 4 (January 1967): 17.

¹²⁵ Dorothy Lyle, “The Basic Bias,” *The Ladder 11*, no. 5 (February 1967): 2-5.

concern to lesbians, such as educational and employment opportunities and discrimination, would be much better addressed through and by women's rights organizations. Here, Martin encouraged DOB women to join the National Organization for Women.¹²⁶ During the remainder of her tenure as editor Sandoz highlighted women of accomplishment, problems of sexism in American society, and the growth of the women's movement.

There was no mistaking the feminism of DOB with the election of lesbian feminist-identified Rita Laporte as president and Barbara Grier as editor of *The Ladder* in 1968. Homophile content remained but DOB's independence from gay men was oft proclaimed and "feminism" occurred with much greater frequency. Martin continued to encourage lesbians to join feminist groups such as NOW. This is not surprising given that she spent more of her grassroots hours in San Francisco NOW and that in 1970 she published "If That's All There Is," a strident farewell to the male dominated homophile movement. It is during this period that the names of future lesbian feminist activists begin to appear. Martha Shelley entered the New York activist scene through DOB and contributed increasingly militant pieces in the lead up to her joining the Radicalesbians. The "Cross Currents" section increasingly detailed militant activism and the rise of the women's movement. Susan Fontaine's "A Time of Sowing" was a feminist call to arms, taking inspiration from women on college campuses. At the end of 1968 an article titled "Out From Under the Rocks—With Guns!" argued that "the Lesbian future is inextricably bound up with the future of the heterosexual woman." Any losses suffered by women generally would hurt lesbians more so than straight women since they did not have male support. In the same issue Wilda Chase authored "Lesbianism and Feminism." She explored the relationship

¹²⁶ Del Martin, "The Lesbians Majority Status," *The Ladder* 11, no. 8 (June 1967): 23-25.

between lesbians and straight feminists and used this space as a call to arms for lesbians to demand their rights as women.¹²⁷

Growth in feminist sentiments was joined by increasing internal conflict. Members like Martin and Lyon, who had always served as important actors in keeping the national body running, shifted their attention to other projects. The overall organization of local chapters and national oversight became increasingly strained at a time with the options for political activity proliferated and activists were pulled in various directions. While chapters would thrive well into the seventies, DOB as a national entity came to an end in 1970. Members voted to disband at the 1970 convention. More damaging, though, was the “liberation” of *The Ladder* by Rita Laporte and Barbara Grier. Laporte simply walked into the DOB office and took publishing tools and the mailing list. For those still invested in the organization it was a devastating theft. According to Grier, however, it was a feminist act meant to save the paper from a suffering organization.¹²⁸ DOB would continue to meet the needs of some in the lesbian community but increasingly those who wanted to engage in feminist politics looked to other sites for their activism.

Continuities and Contributions

The Daughters of Bilitis provided a space through which feminism grew at mid-decade by maintaining a strong commitment to fostering women’s collectivity and activism. As a group that made lesbianism visible, it provided a history: a bedrock for the lesbian feminist activists who built upon its pioneering work. DOB shared in the early political work of naming problems and creating a space for women to feel safe and supported, knowledgeable and empowered.

¹²⁷ Lesley Springvine, “Out From Under the Rocks—With Guns,” *The Ladder* 14, no. 3/4 (December 1969/January 1970): 10-12; Wilda Chase, “Lesbianism and Feminism,” *The Ladder* 14, no. 3/4 (December 1969/January 1970): 13-16.

¹²⁸ Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 159-162.

Members, reflecting back on their time as Daughters, often saw in their actions the seeds of women's liberation. This was most common among those who continued their activism into the seventies within the feminist movement. Phyllis Lyon explained that without seeing it as specifically feminist, *The Ladder* contained "a lot of feminist content."¹²⁹ Lyon and her partner Del Martin indicated they had an awareness of the sexism and male chauvinism they dealt with when among homophile men. When asked about these groups, Martin responded, "talk about macho!" She and Lyon explained that Mattachine leader Hal Cal "just looked right past" women.¹³⁰ Such behavior fueled their ongoing commitment to women-only groups. Writing for *The Ladder* in 1971, a self-identified "over-forty" lesbian argued that radical lesbians could help heterosexual women overcome their "self-hate," and, reflecting on her activism in the sixties, explained, "I felt I belonged to the [women's liberation] movement before it *was*."¹³¹ Hindsight is a powerful force, but these observations reflect responses well documented during their years as Daughters. While they started DOB without knowledge of the male centered groups, they went on to see the importance of maintaining women only space because Mattachine and ONE failed to treat women's issues equally. DOB's insistence on remaining a woman-only organization allowed them to explore these issues and fostered female empowerment.

The Daughters provided an avenue for the development of issues that became priority concerns in the women's movement. Consider, for example, the symmetry between the issues addressed by DOB and by the National Organization for Women. NOW's bill of rights, drafted at its founding conference, highlighted eight key issues: equal employment through EEOC enforcement, job security after maternity leave, childcare tax deductions for working parents, job

¹²⁹ Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, interview by Nan Boyd, December 2, 1992.

¹³⁰ Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, interview by Nan Boyd, December 2, 1992.

¹³¹ Kane Kelley, "Conflict of Identity" *The Ladder* 15, no. 11/12, (August/September 1971): 24.

training, revision of welfare policies in addition to child care programs, the right to stay home with children, reproductive autonomy, and passage of the equal rights amendment.¹³² The emphasis on employment and motherhood mirrored issues that DOB addressed as critical to lesbian lives. During its first couple of years, DOB programing included discussion and advice on raising children as lesbians, how to secure and maintain jobs while living as lesbians, and options for marriage and partnership. The struggles could be different, as with lesbians' concerns over motherhood: the fear of losing children in divorce as a result of their sexuality, having to hide or forego relationships, not being able to have children if they lived as lesbians. And yet the financial realities of women trying to support and care for their children, or simply support themselves without male partners, were often the same regardless of sexuality. One reader of *The Ladder* explored the devastating impact society had upon women who were "taught all their lives" that marriage was the only way to fulfill "their 'natural' destiny" and find "ECONOMIC security" (all caps in the original).¹³³

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, these DOB conversations often focused on adapting to a biased system. And yet there were moments, too, that women declared rights and indicated the activist spirit to come. In writing about lesbians and taxes, for example, Los Angeles DOB leader Helen Sandoz explained, "Those of us who live together and own property and join in our community's interests are householders and have a right to consideration under the constitution."¹³⁴ The ways they approached improving the lives of lesbians in these years suggest that open lesbians had an understanding that they were addressing issues relevant to all women.

¹³² "National Organization for Women Bill of Rights," in *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings From the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 575-576.

¹³³ L.N., "Readers Respond," *The Ladder 1*, no. 11 (August 1957): 28.

¹³⁴ Helen Sanders, "Me vs. Taxes," *The Ladder 2*, no 8 (May 1958); 10.

In fighting for complete lives in which they could support themselves, have their own homes, advance in careers, and care for their children, lesbians were fighting against barriers constructed around gender. DOBs presence, its activism, and its words were foundational steps toward a feminist, political consciousness that would align Daughters with the growing women's rights movement.

As they did so they placed equal importance on social engagements and political activities. While this made room for women with varying interests, it also helped to knit together these areas of activity. The use of public spaces for informational meetings and public outings to parks and bowling allies marked a deliberate step towards visibility. Claiming public spaces functioned as an act of legitimacy and going public that was a part of the political drive to improve lesbian lives. Historian A. Finn Enke, in a study of Midwest feminism, explores the ways in which claiming space functioned to challenge homophobia and make "collective political demands on the public landscape."¹³⁵ Political organizing supported community building by offering another space in which women could come together and build relationships. Assessing their interests and developing the language to express their political arguments allowed members to develop stronger ties and a sense of themselves as a collectivity with mutual interests. DOB foreshadowed the lesbian feminist movement by indicated that improving queer lives came not only from political engagement with the state alone. In blending social, cultural, and political activity, leadership recognized that lesbianism had the potential to shape all areas of one's life. The range of offerings, driven by the interests of officers and members alike, was also likely a product of the DOBs singularity.

¹³⁵ Anne M. Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 26.

Lesbian feminists often looked back upon DOB activists as their feminist foremothers. Barbara Love and Sidney Abbott offered their perspective in their pioneering lesbian feminist text *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, explaining, “With independence foremost in their minds, Feminists arrived at a turning point in the history of women only to find that Lesbians were already there.” They understood the work the Daughters did to build a collective identity and pioneer a feminist politics. Bonnie Zimmerman explained that DOB members “attempted to draw on shared personal experience in order to create a vision and, when possible, a reality of community.”¹³⁶ They did so by addressing the key site of their oppression, “speechlessness, invisibility, inauthenticity,” through “lesbian resistance [which] lies in correct naming.” It was such foundational work that it shaped the trajectory of the movement: “contemporary lesbian feminism is thus primarily a politics of language and consciousness.”¹³⁷ Open lesbians served as a vanguard by demonstrating a model of independence, “choosing autonomy even in the face of incredible hostility.”¹³⁸ Radicalesbian Karla Jay argues that activism of early queers such as the women of DOB made possible the upsurge of activism marked by Stonewall.¹³⁹ Many lesbian feminists would come to see this period as a source of collective history and a starting point of organized lesbian resistance to male domination. Women who lived openly as lesbians before the liberation politics of the seventies served as a bold example of the capabilities of lesbians to resist a homophobic society.

Among lesbian feminists, then, can be found the sentiment that the lesbians who came before them formed a political vanguard of their own, challenging the same gender oppression

¹³⁶ Bonnie Zimmerman, “The Politics of Transliteration: Lesbian Personal Narratives,” *Signs* 9, no. 4 (Summer, 1984): 675.

¹³⁷ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.*, 672; 675.

¹³⁸ Sydney Abbot and Barbara Love, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, 136-142.

¹³⁹ Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 76.

women's liberationists sought to dismantle. Some saw the act of living as an out lesbian, particularly during the oppressive Cold War years, to be a politically charged act. One lesbian feminist reflected that "being a lesbian is a political statement whether the individual woman is aware of that or not. We are evidence that the cultural lessons can be rejected. Our existence challenges the system."¹⁴⁰ At the most radical moments, lesbian feminists rooted the meaning of their activism in the legacy of homophile women to declare their centrality to women's liberation: "WE long before YOU have known discontent with male society.... It is WE who say welcome to you, long blind and oppressed sisters, we have been fighting against male supremacy for a long time, join us!"¹⁴¹ In some ways, this was true. In reflecting on the work of DOB, scholar Barbara Sang explained of the 1950s, "during this time lesbians did not have the benefit of feminist language and concepts, but they were challenging conventional sex role stereotyped relationships in a radical way."¹⁴² The radical elements of 1970s lesbian feminism would soon make these DOB years feel quaint and antiquated. And yet these periods of lesbian activism were knit together in shared needs, interests, motivations, curiosities, and even people. While Daughters may not have foreseen the coming of lesbian separatism, they recognized the role of gender in shaping their lives and stressed the importance of carving out space to explore the political interests of women.

In the seventies scores of lesbian feminist groups joined DOB in offering sites of belonging, community formation, and political mobilization. The Daughters' fifteen years of organizing was part of the wider world of left activism and identity politics that radicalized activists in the decades following World War II. By 1969 there were enough women willing to

¹⁴⁰ Jeri Dilno, "Monogamy and Alternate Life-Styles," in *Our Right to Love*, 57.

¹⁴¹ T.B., "letter," *Everywoman* 2, no. 3 (March 26, 1971).

¹⁴² Barbara Sang, "Lesbian Research: A Critical Evaluation," in *Our Right to Love*, 84.

embrace the politics of gender and sexuality and live their lesbianism as movement. Many of these pioneers (women who established the first lesbian feminist groups in the San Francisco Bay Area, in Los Angeles, and in New York) found entry into lesbian feminism via DOB. The organization alone was not enough to prompt the new shaping of identity that lesbians took up at decade's turn but within the context of a radicalized left it was a critical beginning for many who went on to lead lesbian feminism through the 1970s. DOB's legacy of meeting women where they were in the development of their lesbian identity meant that it offered safe passage into what was for most a new world of identity politics. It offered its members a consciousness about gender and sexuality as well as the solidarity of lesbian community. By 1969 many members harnessed this knowledge and merged it with liberationist ideas swarming around them to forge a new political path. It is not surprising that the earliest sites of this lesbian feminist mobilization occurred in places where DOB chapters long existed. This includes the city by the bay, where some of the movement's first activity appeared.

Chapter 2

Gay Women's Liberation and the Creation of Lesbian Feminism

Lovers Judy Grahn and Wendy Cadden attended a late 1969 Berkeley gay liberation symposium with two friends and a freshly printed stack of Grahn's speech, "On the Development of a Purple Fist."¹ On this November morning men filled the room. Grahn took to the stage to speak to the importance of alliance between oppressed groups while also highlighting the specific oppressions women faced and the urgent need for lesbians to unite in struggle against both sexism and homophobia. Grahn recalls that, with few women in the room, she received little response or applause. This bruising experience helped to crystalize for her, however, the marginalization lesbians faced in gay circles.² After the speech she joined the women with whom she attended the conference, the foursome assembling the other women at the event. In each other's company, she explains, "our faces caught fire from the little sparks of attention we were finally focusing on ourselves as we expressed our sense of outsidersness."³ It was only a number of days before Grahn and Cadden hosted a meeting in their San Francisco Mission District apartment and this newly formed group became Gay Women's Liberation.⁴

¹ Grahn remembers this event as a homophile meeting, though I have not found record of one. It may have been a gay liberation meeting, given the date.

² Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 117.

³ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 117.

⁴ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 122. Early in the movement, lesbians continued to use terms developed in the homophile years. There was significant overlap between women who identified variously as lesbian feminists,

An unexpected cast of activists composed Gay Women's Liberation (GWL), their diversity a fundamental factor in shaping their ideas for revolution. Their varied identities contest interpretations of lesbian feminists as solely college-aged, white, and middle class.⁵ The persistence of these definitions obscures a more complex, diverse reality of the lesbian feminism specifically as well as the women's movement broadly. Judy Grahn grew up in poverty, served in the military, underwent psychoanalysis, and ultimately decided to live openly as a dyke.⁶ During the 1960s she was part of a small minority of white students at Howard University, spent time in the homophile movement, and participated in the gay bar scene. She was 30 when she began her GWL journey. Wendy Cadden (Grahn's lover) came from radical civil rights and anti-war movements. Carol Wilson had long lived with a lesbian partner and child and entered politics through the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB). Alice Molloy (Wilson's lover) was in her thirties and shared a background in DOB. Linda Wilson identified as a "black activist dyke."⁷ Louise Merrill "spent her life fighting imperialism after being radicalized from a childhood spent in South America" and came of a thoroughly working class, socialist feminist perspective.⁸ Red Jordan Arobateau, who self-defines as "White, Native, Hispanic, and African American," was

gay women, woman-identified, and so on. This same naming occurred in other places as well, such as Los Angeles. In most cases, "lesbian" or "woman-identified" became the more common identifiers as queer women separated themselves from the gay movement in favor of the women's movement. Throughout the decade, however, some would continue to prefer using "gay women."

⁵ Women's historian Ruth Rosen juxtaposes lesbian feminists with an older generation of bar dykes. Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 172. Queer scholar Marc Stein shares this definition of "radical lesbian feminists" but acknowledges important distinctions. Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 93.

⁶ She describes making a conscious decision to abandon any efforts to live a traditional heterosexual lifestyle and identify with her particular vision of lesbianism. Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 65.

⁷ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 116.

⁸ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 154. Merrill had a long history of working within the labor movement, running as a socialist for New York Senate and helping to found the Workers World Party. Louise Merrill Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

and continues to identify as a poor writer and artist.⁹ A truly intersectional collaboration thus fashioned the groundbreaking ideas GWL contributed to shaping lesbian feminism. Working alongside one another to determine how their sexuality united them without erasing their many differences was the group's foundational act. Grahn recalls, "It was clear to us, we didn't know what we had to say to each other but it was clear to us that we were never going to be able to talk to each other if we didn't get some space of our own. So we immediately started Gay Women's Liberation. Never looked back."¹⁰ It is essential to acknowledge the contributions to the lesbian movement made by women of color, trans folk, working class women, and the like. Whatever the changes in membership through the trajectory of GWL, this intersectional consciousness infused the group's ideas. Drawing up such a range of experiences with the many systems of oppressions members faced certainly infused their politics and pushed them to create a radical vision of what their movement should be.¹¹

The process of making meaning out of a shared sexual identity that united this diverse group of women formed a clear starting point for GWL. They labored towards a theory of liberation by analyzing how gender and sexuality created the systems of oppression they faced. This work empowered them to reject definitions of female sexuality created in and designed to support a patriarchal society. But as much as it was about rejecting a sexist society, it was equally rooted in a shared love for women. GWL engaged in this work alongside lesbians active

⁹ Arobateau now identifies as a trans man. While he was lesbian-identified during the period discussed here, any future references to Arobateau will use male pronouns. See <http://www.redjordanarobateau.com/bio.html>, accessed 1/13/16.

¹⁰ Judy Grahn, Interview by the author, Palo Alto, California, February 28, 2014.

¹¹ I am not claiming that GWL was perfectly diverse. The group would remain predominantly white and under 40. But noting the active participation of women of color, women from working class backgrounds, and women of different age groups is important to understanding the politics of GWL. Diverse voices were central to the formation of their vision of lesbian feminism and facilitated a good deal of intersectional politics, as I will discuss throughout. I am still working on outreach to women active in GWL to get a better sense of representation.

in other cities, sometimes unaware of one another but in time becoming a national, collaborative community. These lesbian feminist activists constructed a new approach to feminist politics by sharing ideas about how to see lesbianism as empowering and a tool for change. Through their manifestos they developed ideas that produced a movement possible of extremes. Some within it opted for complete separatism from all but other lesbian feminists while others envisioned it as including all women. In new spaces designed specifically by and for lesbians, these activists hoped to understand why society feared women who loved women and how a newly articulated lesbianism could provide a framework for the liberation of all women.

The intimacy created through their private conversations and theoretical deliberations paired with the alienation experienced in gay and women's organizations convinced many lesbians that they needed a separate politics. Lesbian commonly articulated moments of isolation like those detailed in the opening paragraph. Increased analysis of sexism as central to the societal inequalities gay women faced pushed many lesbians toward seeing women rather than gay men as their natural allies. Finding that the men of gay liberation rarely gave due attention to women's specific experiences, lesbians sought out other political paths.¹² Lesbians shared many (if not most) of the goals articulated by the more radical of their (straight) feminist sisters but gay women commonly found that these women failed to recognize their sexuality as a political priority. In feminist rap groups and organizational meetings lesbians encountered much of the same apprehension and judgment they experienced in society at large. As lesbians around the country increasingly shared experiences of disinterest, hostility, and dismissal in gay and

¹² I discuss these issues further in the next section of this chapter.

women's liberation, and as they came to see power in working alongside other gay women, lesbian feminism flourished.¹³

In this chapter I trace the trajectory of Gay Women's Liberation as the pioneering lesbian feminist organization in the San Francisco Bay Area. Members began with penning manifestos to define their sexuality through the realities of their own experiences and seeking to understand the political implications of these new interpretations. They circulated their writings as a response to their own histories of isolation as well as the hunger for information witnessed in their community. Such materials and the conversations that ensued made lesbians visible to one another and able to explore what liberation meant to gay women specifically. It brought women pouring into weekly meetings, which swiftly made GWL a recognizable political force in the Bay Area. During this first phase of their new movement (1969-1973) lesbian feminists achieved visibility by confronting their straight sisters and by creating their own organizations. Initially, GWL was both a part of and separate from women's liberation in the Bay Area. The growth of lesbian community and the different approaches to political change, however, prodded gay women to focus more fully on separatist endeavors. Creating housing collectives challenged the nuclear family. Assembling a printing press meant rejecting male authority in knowledge production. Running a women's bookstore provided a means of defying expectations that women's and lesbians' lives be restricted to private spaces. Building on their new definitions of lesbianism, they embraced each aspect of these undertakings, from binding books to laying concrete, as political acts that furthered women's liberation.

¹³ A "gay/straight split" between lesbian and straight feminists is a common part of the New York feminist narrative. In this chapter I consider how lesbians chose to separate from their straight sisters in ways both similar to and different from those on the east coast. See: Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Sarah Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Annelise Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*.

I argue that GWL (a multiracial, multiclass group of queer women) was the first in the nation to begin building the lesbian feminist movement. They recognized gay or women's liberation groups recognized lesbians as legitimate participants they rarely made lesbian issues a priority. At the same time, conversations in preliminary meetings generated vivid visions how their new understandings of women's sexuality could be deployed to produce a much grander revolutionary project. They protected the intimate spaces in which their ideas developed but to desire a complete destruction of patriarchy was to have deep investment in the futures of all women. The separatism of GWL therefore did not mean isolation from (straight) feminism. In order to enact and achieve their liberatory politics they had to be truly engaged with the wider women's community. In this period Gay Women's Liberation moved from theoretical production to project activism and in so doing positioned Bay Area lesbian feminists as critical to the growth of the local women's movement as well as key actors in the construction of a national lesbian movement. These lesbian feminists envisioned a world in which all women would come to understand the value of a women-centered life as a means of liberating one another. Judy Grahn recalled,

We wanted women's bodies and sexualities liberated for each woman to inhabit for herself. We wanted battery and sexual assault against women to stop, we wanted the streets to be safe and pleasant for women to walk, we wanted mothers to be supported with childcare and in other ways, we wanted women's ideas and creative thoughts to be taken seriously. We wanted equality for all... In short, we wanted a simple, but complete, revolution.¹⁴

Grahn's words make it clear that lesbian feminists shared in the values of their (straight) feminist sisters and were ultimately oriented towards women's liberation even as they built lesbian-centered politics. The need to focus solely on women's relationships with one another, however, drove their trajectory as an independent lesbian movement.

¹⁴ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 131.

Building Gay Women's Liberation

Gay Women's Liberation was movement building at its most intimate. Founders Judy Grahn, Wendy Cadden, Alice Molloy, and Carol Wilson functioned as the core force of the group. They offered their personal homes as meeting venues and home phone numbers as information hotlines. They welcomed women into their living rooms, pairing discussions of personal identity with ideas for revolutionary social and political change.¹⁵ They mapped common interests and shared goals, validating feelings of oppression and a sense that a better future was possible. As a loose collective, GWL provided a consistent point of contact for lesbians while also offering a flexibility that allowed each participant to mind her comfort levels and follow her passions. There are few sources available to closely track GWL. All indications are that its major contribution was constructing a lesbian feminist presence in San Francisco and serving as a starting point for woman-identified projects that became pivotal the Bay Area's women's movement. Its influence is visible in its manifestos as well as the project activism pursued by its members through the 1970s and beyond. After the first year, participation expanded and founders transferred coordination to new members. The trajectory of GWL is harder to trace after its initial burst of activism. This was not uncommon for Bay Area grassroots politics. Sociologist Elizabeth Armstrong has noted that Bay Area gay liberation groups "were ephemeral, short-lived, and hard to document," with "gay liberation events and energies...only loosely associated with organizational carriers."¹⁶ What is clear is that GWL created a critically important site of coming together to establish lesbian feminism as a distinct entity within the Bay Area women's community. It made lesbianism a visible and relevant political force. Through the

¹⁵ Ibid., 118.

¹⁶ Elizabeth A. Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994* (Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 2002), 79-80.

group there emerged a connected community and a series of projects that provided lesbian and straight feminists with important sites of political and cultural activity throughout the seventies.¹⁷

This newly formed lesbian presence in the feminist scene worked to be an inclusive, welcoming organization. Rather than pursuing a set political agenda GWL was a “loose confederation of small groups and individuals” empowered to take up lesbian feminism in ways that best suited participants.¹⁸ The group welcomed “homosexual and bisexual women” to join what they planned to be “more activist and political than established lesbian organizations like Nova and the Daughters of Bilitis.”¹⁹ There is no indication that they used sexual identities to police participation; one early description of meetings explained that they were open to all gay women and all “interested straight women.”²⁰ Meetings took place in the city and the East Bay, recognizing the need for unity among these somewhat separate communities of women.²¹ Interested women could call GWL coordinators at home, reaching Grahn and Cadden in San Francisco or Molloy and Wilson in Berkeley.²² Group coordinators also made a point to

¹⁷ I this chapter I trace projects that developed from the work of core GWL members. The amorphous nature of GWL makes it nearly impossible to trace. And, ultimately, the point of GWL was to foster the type of community activism that occurred through the work of Grahn and Cadden to create a women’s press or through the work of Wilson and Molloy to build a women’s bookstore. I pick up these threads through the following chapters as well.

¹⁸ “What’s Happening,” *It Ain’t Me Babe 1*, no. 7 (May 21-June 10, 1970): 15.

¹⁹ “Gay Fem Lib Set,” *Berkeley Barb 10*, no 3 (January 16-22, 1970): 7.

²⁰ Pasha, “Women Together,” *Gay Sunshine 1*, no. 2 (date unclear): 14.

²¹ The San Francisco women’s community was closely linked with those of women in the surrounding Bay Area, Oakland and Berkeley in particular. GWL, for example, alternated weekly meetings between the city and the East Bay. These ties would remain, but women also looked to have resources in their own neighborhoods. As I discuss in chapter 3, for example, A Woman’s Place bookstore was a pioneering space for information and community building, but San Francisco women still wanted to have such a space within the city limits.

²² With time (late 1970/early 1971) these contacts and locations changed. These meetings continued at least through 1971 though it is not entirely clear if they continued in women’s homes and who facilitated (beyond first names listed in newspaper directories). I’m dealing with a shortage of lesbian/feminist papers upon which to draw for 1972/1973. By this point, however, women-centered public spaces offered new options for meetings and new outlets for activist energies.

advertise that GWL included “a wider variety of members and more participation from ALL races, classes, and types of sisters.”²³ Without organizational records there is little evidence of the composition of GWL participants beyond the core activists mentioned in the introduction. One indication that it may have had success in fostering a diverse community (or that there was, at least, a genuine effort to do so) is to look at the projects that grew out of it. Judy Grahn explained of the press she and Cadden established, “we made sure that the press was multi-cultural and expanded our membership strategically” so that by 1974 it was “solidly” diverse. Members included black, Filipino American, Korean American, and Jewish women as well solid working class representation.²⁴ This participation indicates that a diversity of voices helped to shape the meaning and scope of lesbian feminist activism in the Bay Area.

Weekly meetings facilitated consciousness raising alongside direct action within the community. Information on these meetings is similarly scarce though one letter written to the San Francisco newspaper *Gay Sunshine* provides some insight. “Pasha” began by listing a number of reservations one might have in attending before explaining why GWL mattered. Participants “do not all have similar political views or common life styles.” Rather, “about the only thing we have in common is a desire to do something about our oppression as women and specifically as lesbians.” Meetings were run much as they were in gay and women’s liberation, with egalitarian structurelessness. Participants selected meeting chairs at random and tasked them with facilitating conversation only. They created agendas collectively and decided time

²³ “Gay Women—Want to Come Out?” *Berkeley Barb* 12, no. 34 (Aug 21-27, 1970): 7.

²⁴ Carol Seajay, “Some Beginnings: An Interview with Judy Grahn,” *Feminist Bookstore News* 13, no. 1 (May/June 1990): 25. This assertion about diverse representation is supported by new scholarship from Kristen Hogan in her study of women’s bookstores. According to her research, GWL was “intentionally racially diverse” in ways that manifested “transracial feminist belonging” as activists moved on to new projects through the 1970s. Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 5.

allotments for each issue via consensus. In the short time Pasha had been in attendance she witnessed the creation of many small groups for consciousness raising as well as formation of committees to take up specific projects. The meetings helped women develop projects and keep one another up to date on resources and options for political engagement. GWL thus became a significant point of contact for lesbian activity throughout the Bay Area. Members also reached out to women's community around the bay to offer a host of services. Red Arobateau taught women-only karate classes in San Francisco and Berkeley. Carol Wilson advertised her position as a woman mechanic interested in teaching repair skills to other women. Other skills and services included mimeographing, mechanical drawing, and a speaker's bureau. Thanks to their work on the local feminist paper, in developing a feminist press, and forming a women's center, GWL further had the resources to facilitate the production of the Women's Liberation Newsletter and distribution of movement material.²⁵

Word of GWL spread quickly through Bay Area press. It appeared first in *It Ain't Me Babe* (*Babe*, for short).²⁶ This is not surprising given overlap in membership of the two entities. *Babe* announced GWL activities and events. But even in this paper, so closely tied to the lesbian feminist group, there were few pieces that detailed specific activity. Lesbian and women's publications promoted the group. The Stanford-based lesbian publication *Mother*, which claimed to represent views "from conservative to radical," listed GWL contact numbers alongside information for lesbian friendly churches.²⁷ The *Common Woman* did not have a "clearly defined political line" when small group members announced the formation of the paper at San Francisco's follow up meeting to the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention.

²⁵ "What's Happening," *It Ain't Me Babe* 1, no. 7 (May 21, 1970): 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ "Organizations," *Mother* 1, no. 1 (June 1971): 7.

Published out of the Berkeley Women's Center, however, it had a comprehensive contact list that included GWL.²⁸ As late as spring of 1974 the group showed up on resource lists, such as its inclusion in the first issue of *Plexus* (listed as operating out of the new Berkeley Women's Center housed by the Allston street YWCA).²⁹ Gay and independent press in the city carried word of GWL as well. On occasion the *San Francisco Free Press* or *The Berkeley Barb* included brief reports on GWL activities. *Gay Sunshine* succeeded early on in covering GWL content (even as the papers graphic male nudes indicate that it had attracted mainly a male readership).³⁰ The *San Francisco Free Press*, a gay (male) publication, provided Grahn and Cadden's contact information under the title "Women's Gay Liberation Group."³¹ Information was corrected by later that year, and included contact for both San Francisco and Berkeley, as well as information for the Addison House Gay Women's Rap Group (discussed below, Addison was a housing collective of GWL women).³² Word of mouth and activist networks were likely most important in building GWL, but this inclusion in area press across multiple communities helped reach women who might not otherwise have ties to the growing lesbian feminist scene.

Even with a clear articulation of alliance with the women's movement Gay Women's Liberation attempted collaboration with gay men on certain issues at first. In May of 1970 they partnered with gay liberation groups to disrupt a meeting of the American Psychiatric

²⁸ "The Beginning," *The Common Woman* 1, no. 1 (February 1971): 1; "Phones," *The Common Woman* 1, no. 1 (February 1971): 8.

²⁹ "Resources," *Plexus* 1, no. 1 (March 15-31, 1974): 9. Plexus staff removed GWL from the directory after the second issue.

³⁰ "Organizations," *Gay Sunshine* 1, no.1 (August/September 1970): 19.

³¹ "Directory," *San Francisco Free Press* 1, no. 9 (April 1970): 14.

³² "Gay Directory," *San Francisco Free Press* 2, no. 11 (November 1970): 14.

Association's annual meeting in San Francisco to protest the usage of aversion therapy.³³ That August, GWL, DOB, and NOVA (the three lesbian groups who shared the stage at the Second Bay Area Women's Coalition Conference) attended the San Francisco meeting of the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations (NACHO). They were joined by "Gay Liberationists" who attended to demand that participating groups adopt "confrontation street politics." The lesbian groups critiqued NACHO as "male oriented and irrelevant to the needs of female homosexuals." This critique was particularly poignant given that the conference was scheduled on August 26th in direct conflict with the National Woman's Strike.³⁴ GWL member Sally Gearhart indicates that the issue of participation with gay men was resolved in the summer of 1970. The issue provoked "heated expression" when GWL debated whether to join the protests of "gay brothers" at Macy's where police regularly entrapped gay men. At this meeting they "talked long and shouted loud" with a number of women seeing a shared oppression with gay men. But the majority felt that their "allegiance clearly lies with women first." This meeting made clear "a solid and uncompromising assessment of priorities." All of this, in spite of ongoing experiences of homophobia at the hands of these feminist allies.³⁵

As lesbian feminism became a fixed presence in the Bay Area straight and lesbian groups had to negotiate what their relationships would be long term. It was not clear initially what GWL's relationship would be with (straight) feminism. Cooperation typified the Bay Area women's community in these early years. The San Francisco chapter of the National Organization for Women put on the first Bay Area Women's Coalition Conference in September

³³ Del Martin, "The Politics of Mental Illness," Box 36/19, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

³⁴ Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, "The Homophile Movement and Gay Liberation," Box 35/10, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

³⁵ Sally Gearhart, Statement to San Francisco National Organization for Women, March 18, 1971, Box 26/15, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

1969. Over twenty organizations participated, representing the breadth of Bay Area women's rights activists. Longstanding women's groups such as Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and American Association of University Women participated alongside new militant groups like the Society for Humane Abortion and Women's Liberation. Women from the Young Socialists Alliance joined those from the Mexican-American Political Association and the Negro Historical and Cultural Society. In that first meeting 150 women created a nine point action agenda that prioritized maintaining and promoting the coalition, protesting employment discrimination, promoting positive images of women in the media, advocating for child care centers, and ensuring reproductive freedom (including abortion).³⁶ Together, these groups functioned as "a local, loose coalition of organizations in pursuit of progressive change."³⁷ Participants succeeded in maintaining ties and the coalition met again in February of 1970. Around the city these and other groups utilized intergroup councils, mass meetings, and specific action campaigns to keep women of diverse interests working in unison. Historian Stephanie Gilmore emphasizes that this coalitional activity was critical to San Francisco feminism in these early years. With the existence of so many small groups they relied on partnerships to exert significant political influence.³⁸ Instead of facing a deep ideological divide, these groups of various positions joined together on shared priorities. To discuss women's role in a strike at the University of California, for example, Berkeley Women's Liberation brought together the majority of the area's women's groups, including NOW, the International Socialists Women's

³⁶ "Women's Rights Drive Starts Action Program," *San Francisco Free Press* 1, no. 3 (October 16-31, 1969): 10; Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell: Grassroots Feminist Activism in Postwar America* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 100.

³⁷ Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell*, 98-99.

³⁸ Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell*, 99-101.

Caucus, and Women of the Free Future.³⁹ A general commitment to advancing women's rights proved enough to bring together liberal, socialist, lesbian, and radical feminists even as specific organizational priorities differed.

Such cooperation within the women's community suggested lesbians were right to look to feminism as a site to situate their activism. There was a learning curve for straight feminism but it intimated an openness to lesbians. Consider, for example, the first Bay Area Women's Coalition Conference. SF NOW included on the agenda only those groups considered to be major organizations and in so doing did not include the lesbian perspective. This omission is striking given that the coordinator for the event was DOB founder Del Martin and that the founding of DOB preceded SF NOW (and National!) by over a decade. Conference attendees recognized that the lesbian perspective was not present in the programming, however, and asked that a representative be allowed to speak. National DOB president Rita Laporte briefly addressed the room and received a warm reception. Ultimately, however, the agreed upon action program did not include lesbian rights in its list of priorities.⁴⁰ The coalition's second meeting corrected this omission and included a lesbian panel in the program. Response to the speakers demonstrated overwhelming support for the included groups and resulted in a statement that recognized lesbians as "one among many women's groups" with legitimate interests in the movement. These efforts demonstrated that a divide existed between straight and lesbian feminists from the beginning but also suggested that women on both sides were willing to bridge such divisions.

³⁹ "Berkeley," *It Ain't Me Babe 1*, no. 7 (May 21, 1970): 18.

⁴⁰ Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman*, 20th anniversary ed. (Volcano, CA: Volcano Press, 1991), 263.

Yet it became clear rather quickly that recognizing lesbians as feminists was not the same thing as treating lesbian issues as a feminist priority or supporting them in (straight) feminist organizations. GWL members endeavored for a time to make women's groups welcoming to lesbians by addressing instances of homophobia. In one attempt to push a group towards greater inclusion GWL activists took over a NOW meeting and stood in a long line at the front of the room hand-in-hand. They sought to make NOW women literally face the issue of queer sexuality.⁴¹ Within the radical grassroots community of women's liberation they arranged a dialogue between gay and straight women to take place in workshops hosted at the San Francisco Women's Center.⁴² While there is little documentation as to the outcomes of these efforts, the continued movement towards separatism indicates that lesbians did not find the sisterhood they sought among straight women. GWL's Sally Gearhart addressed SF NOW in March 1971 to explain lesbian feminists chosen affiliation with the women's movement while addressing ongoing feminist fears of association with lesbians.⁴³ Returning to the events of the Second Bay Area Women's Coalition Conference elucidates such tensions. The same statement issued at the conclusion of this meeting that recognized lesbian participation also declared, "Lesbianism is not a major issue in the Women's Rights Movement."⁴⁴ Here, straight feminism made its position quite clear. Lesbians could be part of the movement but only if they did not demand attention to

⁴¹ Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon's membership and participation in SF NOW indicates that the group was welcoming of lesbians. While the two were out to the chapter leadership, however, their relationship "may not have been common knowledge among the general membership." That they eventually started a new NOW chapter as the result of homophobia and racism indicates that even where participation was allowed or welcomed, (straight) feminist organizations could fail to adequately support them in their feminism. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman*, 263; Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 129.

⁴² Pasha, "Women Together," *Gay Sunshine* 1, no. 2 (October 1970): 14.

⁴³ Sally Gearhart, Statement to San Francisco National Organization for Women, March 18, 1971, Box 26/15, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁴⁴ "Report of the Women's Coalition Meeting," quoted in Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell*, 102. This quote comes from a report that was part of the personal files of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, from which Gilmore quotes extensively in her chapter on San Francisco NOW.

issues their straight sisters did not share. The positions of groups varied, to be sure, but the composite of lesbian experiences within the women's community left lesbians with little reason to trust that their issues would find support.

Lesbians maintained the legitimacy of their feminism but determined that their time would be better spent building organizations and institutions certain to be inclusive of their concerns. This shift towards separatism was a phenomenon not limited to any one thread of the women's movement and one that occurred throughout this period. GWL women were among the first to move in this direction but they were not alone. Lesbians across the Bay Area opted to create their own spaces. Some looked to serve the "total community" of "gay women" and published the monthly paper *Mother* (1971).⁴⁵ Others followed the lead of New York women and identified themselves as San Francisco Radicalesbians with a political agenda based upon "The Woman-Identified Woman" as well as document produced by Detroit women, "The Fourth World Manifesto."⁴⁶ Longtime NOW members (and DOB founders) Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon partnered with women of color, including former national NOW president Aileen Hernandez, to address the letdowns experienced in San Francisco NOW. Together they critiqued the chapter's failure to address internal tensions or to take up issues affecting these more marginalized women. They lobbied national NOW for a new policy allowing more than one chapter per city. Once the new policy was in place they created Golden Gate NOW and prioritized the political needs of minority women.⁴⁷ These activists remained "orientated to Women's Liberation" in spite of movement homophobia because they believed that

⁴⁵ R.G. Parker, "In Mother's Opinion," *Mother 1*, no. 1 (June 1971): 2.

⁴⁶ San Francisco Radicalesbians, "Guest Speaker: Lesbianism is Revolution," *Mother 1*, no. 2 (July 1971): 3.

⁴⁷ This move required a change in national NOW policy to allow only one chapter per city. That they went about this process of changing policy suggests the level of disagreement present in SF NOW over political priorities. Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell*, 117.

understanding gender and combatting patriarchal structures were the critical components of liberation.⁴⁸ They created their own feminism by insisting that revolutionary change required an analysis of the intimate, inseparable relationship between gender and sexuality.

Defining Lesbianism⁴⁹

GWL's first political project was to redefine female homosexuality on their own terms. The importance of this work cannot be overestimated. Lesbians at this time yearned for information – particularly that produced by women, for women. Medical texts, pulp novels, and Cold War propaganda rarely offered anything other than shame and fear. GWL members offered a corrective to this biased knowledge base by writing and circulating manifestos that showed their ideas in progress. Thus began a process of constructing a politically informed collective identity. The documents they composed (and those produced by counterparts around the country) functioned as a radical intervention contesting long held beliefs about lesbianism. Revolutionary understandings of women's sexuality became possible through such writings and the conversations that accompanied them. Each personal transformation inspired the desire to share and add to lesbian feminist knowledge, stimulating the proliferation of manifestos in the movement's first months. This practice allowed them to focus fully on themselves and theorize on the specific oppressions, experiences, and goals of gay women. In the space of the page, lesbians could prioritize their own needs and ignore those of men – a significant act of feminism and of lesbian separatism. Their newly conceived lesbian shaped the trajectory of their movement.

⁴⁸ Gay Women's Liberation, "Statement of Gay Women's Liberation," *Lesbians Speak Out*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Women's Press Collective, 1971): 47.

⁴⁹ This section draws heavily from my article on the role of Judy Grahn in building the lesbian feminist movement. Chelsea Del Rio, "Voicing Gay Women's Liberation: Judy Grahn and the Shaping of Lesbian Feminism," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 19, no. 3 (2015): 357-366.

Judy Grahn's November 1969 speech "On the Development of a Purple Fist" became the first statement issued by GWL as a declaration of their new political perspective. Retitled "Lesbians as Women," it explored the interconnectedness of minority groups, linking the project of lesbian liberation with that of people of color, the poor, students, homeless, environmental activists, and more.⁵⁰ She shared her vision of "all the pretty little horses" who had the potential to create a "beautiful society" free of oppression by exploring their differences and similarities, sharing their ideas, and working in solidarity. GWL called upon women to cross boundaries of various identities to build mutual understanding; the group explained to gay women, "We must go to the women," whichever group they might belong to.⁵¹ GWL believed that lesbians, women working with at least two intersecting identities, functioned centrally in this project of looking beyond boundaries.⁵² The statement called for intersectional solidarity while also emphasizing that queer women would have to come together in their own groups to harness the attributes of independent womanhood. In a sexist society, lesbians functioned as "mavericks, without the legal and economic bonds of marriage, or the smothering and basically unpaid labor of individual childrearing" and who entered freely into "manly territories."⁵³ In GWL's vision lesbians were not merely homosexuals categorized by same-sex desire; they were also women

⁵⁰ Judy Grahn authored "Lesbians as Woman" and "Lesbians as Bogeywomen," though both were first published as statements from Gay Women's Liberation. She was likely also the primary or sole author of the other manifestos as well. Because they were issued as organizational statements, I discuss them here as authored by GWL.

⁵¹ Gay Women's Liberation, "Lesbians as Women," in *Lesbians Speak Out*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Women's Press Collective, 1970), 14.

⁵² Grahn did not ignore other identity categories that further shaped women's lives, though they did not always function equally alongside the categories "women" and "lesbian." Class and the economic barriers women faced are common themes, likely a product of her own working class background. Race, too, is addressed, though with less frequency in these early manifestos. The activism of GWL was inclusive if not representative, functioning as home to women of diverse class and race identities. Grahn discusses these characteristics in *A Simple Revolution*.

⁵³ Gay Women's Liberation, "Lesbians as Women," 11-16.

who transgressed gender norms to prioritize an independent pursuit of seemingly nontraditional interests and life paths.

GWL celebrated the feminist insights that came with their positionality while also asserting the oppressions distinct to lesbian lives. Lesbianism could also bring with it extreme isolation, barriers to childrearing, financial insecurity, and “systematic legal and individual repressions.” For all of these restrictions enacted upon queer women, Grahn argued that womanhood “hobbled [lesbians] even more severely” by creating an entire structure of expectations and restrictions that dictated the female experience.⁵⁴ She grounded this work in evaluation of sex roles women faced, but considered gender norms as well, suggesting that chosen lesbianism could offer a way to subvert biologically determined roles and to recreate meanings of womanhood. Under patriarchy, all women experienced the confines of “male chauvinism” and “antihomosexuality,” demonstrating the need for greater political unity among them. “Lesbians as Women” concluded with a call for cooperation and mutual support between lesbians and straight women indicating a new political path in which lesbians would be better served by embracing feminist ideologies and seeking out women as allies. Gay Women’s Liberation members thus committed themselves to an analysis of lesbian identity that prioritized belonging to the women’s movement.

“Lesbians as Bogeywomen,” written just two months later in January 1970, focused more fully on how sex and sexuality functioned together in policing women’s behavior. Gay Women’s Liberation argued that all women suffered from heterosexist definitions of lesbianism and thus all women would benefit from working together to dismantle them. In a culture that expected women to embrace sex-specific roles, people rarely understood (or cared to understand) the reasons behind women’s decisions to chart alternative courses. Rejecting marriage for a life

⁵⁴ Gay Women’s Liberation, “Lesbians as Women,” 14.

of self-sufficiency, for example, marked women as queer regardless of whether their choices were motivated by a love for women. In the histories of passing women, GWL explored how the judgments of deviance grew more complex the more visible the transgressions of gender roles became. Whatever the violation, she argued, “every woman who steps out of line gets assigned a sexual definition.” Labels of “lesbian, whore, nymphomaniac, castrator, adulteress,” awaited any woman who asserted her independence. GWL thus linked the goals of feminism with those of lesbian liberation by demonstrating how accusations of sexual deviance were used to police all women’s behavior. A society reliant on gender and sexual categories only served to create divisions and inequalities, which meant that disrupting a system in which relationships were sex- and gender-based sat at the heart of lesbian and feminist politics.⁵⁵

While these two texts functioned as acts of empowerment, they also conveyed the emotional burdens imposed by the isolation experienced at the intersections of homophobia and sexism. GWL created a picture in which lesbians faced barriers to fulfillment in all parts of their lives, knowing that to “confess” to “our friends, our bosses, our teachers, our parents, or our preachers” was a gamble that could result in any number of devastating consequences.⁵⁶ As such, “the lesbian solution to a male dominated society has been to hide,” which resulted in an “agonizingly schizophrenic” “double life.”⁵⁷ The pressures to hide resulted in feelings of “alienation” and “restricted lives,” of being “cut off from the human race” and bound by “fences.”⁵⁸ Concealing this part of themselves limited options for community building and restricted opportunities to collectively conceive of lesbianism as an identity grounded in positive

⁵⁵ Gay Women’s Liberation, “Lesbians as Bogeywomen,” in *Lesbians Speak Out*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Women’s Press Collective, 1970), 21.

⁵⁶ Gay Women’s Liberation, “Lesbians as Women,” 11.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 11-15.

life experiences. There existed a sense separation from self. The progression of ideas in “Lesbians as Women” makes it clear that this tension was a product of the limitations imposed by a “homosexuality” framework when what members were actually trying to understand was lesbian isolation in relationship to the alienation all women felt. Through this negotiation a raw attempt to understand the painful experiences of discrimination, harassment, and violence becomes visible. In these writings, GWL connects with self-respect; members find pride in, rather than isolation from, a complete identity as *gay women*.

Their solution to lesbian oppression lay in publically claiming womanhood and then challenging its meaning as gay women’s threat came not in who they had sex with but how they violated gender roles. This perspective marked an important rejection of the longstanding links between homosexuality and gender inversion. GWL explored how sex roles intersected with sexuality to define lesbian experiences and thus grounded lesbian liberation in the feminist movement. Lesbians rejected a system in which women attached themselves to men for financial survival, provided the emotional and physical labor of supporting a male-centered economy, and made themselves sexually available to men. “Lesbians as Women” included a personal anecdote from Judy Grahn in order to illustrate this point. In relating the story of drunken man who called her a queer and broke her nose she argued that “he didn’t give a damn about my choice of sexual partners.” Rather, “what upset him” when he saw her arriving at the hamburger stand on her motorcycle “was my intrusion into two of his manly territories: machinery and action.” She presented him with the image of a “liberated woman,” an image that patriarchal conditioning taught him to fear and “react violently against.”⁵⁹ In asserting the right to live outside of the nuclear family model, pursue their own careers and passions, and surround themselves with women, while also making womanhood central to their identity, lesbians challenged the very

⁵⁹ Ibid., 15.

basis of sex categories and postwar gender roles. In the lesbian feminist vision, the disruption and displacement of these categories would remove the stigma attached to women-loving women.

In these documents members considered how this love ought to manifest and its role in defining lesbianism. They noted that “pornographic fantasy” shaped most people’s ideas about lesbianism. This meant that their very existence was defined through male sexual gaze rather than their lived experiences.⁶⁰ GWL rejected sex as the central characteristic of lesbianism and opted instead for seemingly contradictory markers of lesbian identity. Rather than being “obsessed with sex,” lesbians joined their straight sisters in obsession with “love and fidelity.” At the same time, GWL argued that being “strongly interested in independence and having a lifework” was what made lesbians “extra ordinary.” In these categories of sameness and difference, lesbianism functioned as both a natural part of womanhood and as a pathway of liberation. They did not deny the sex act but placed it in a reciprocal understanding of love. Lesbianism was not “something you are” but rather, “something you do.” It was “the love you give” to other women that sat at the center of this identity.⁶¹ Leaving the meaning of “love” ambiguous and focusing instead on the bonds between women, GWL subverted a society intent on sexualizing women and made room for women to decide for themselves the meanings of their relationships. But there was another reason displacing sex as central to defining lesbianism: of all of the restrictions this community faced, sexual fulfillment was not one of them.⁶² Sexism and homophobia did not prohibit these women from engaging in the sexual relationships they desired. Their liberation project was a more expansive one. GWL was preparing to attack “male

⁶⁰ Gay Women’s Liberation, “Lesbians as Bogeywomen,” 20.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶² Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 125.

chauvinism and antihomosexuality” as a means to empower all women to choose the lives most suited to their desires, without shame or restriction.

GWL offered female collectivity as the solution to patriarchal practices of seeing women through their sexual availability. In “Womanhood: A Call for Self-Determination” they explained that to create a “sisterhood consciousness” women “must first redefine their relationships and ways of relating to one another as women.” While they asserted that this was not necessarily a call for universal lesbianism, they did explain that to the extent that lesbianism is “the feeling of strong affection by one woman for another woman,” all women-centered women fell within the lesbian spectrum.⁶³ This manifesto marked a clear step in blurring the boundaries between definitions of “lesbian” and “woman.” As historically used these identities were fraught with patriarchal norms; blurring their usage disrupted such norms. This statement marked a greater allegiance with the women’s movement and a severing of ties to gay liberation. Sexuality continued to play a part in their conceptualizing of their identity but gender was now a nonnegotiable component.

Two months before New York’s Lavender Menace action, GWL issued its strongest lesbian feminist manifesto, “Statement of Gay Women’s Liberation.” The central argument was that “women loving each other” was “a natural process.” in spite of a society that said love ought to only exist through “marriage and blood,” women could choose to direct their love solely to other women and in so doing they could dismantle oppression. They argued that love between women was denaturalized through the construction of modern gay identity, “a learned process” that was “designed to prevent women from loving and trusting each other.” Sexual activity was not absent but closeness and “sex vibrations” should only be shared with a “comrade.” The

⁶³ Berkeley Gay Women’s Liberation, “Womanhood: A Call for Self-Determination,” in *Lesbians Speak Out*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Women’s Press Collective, 1971), 32-33.

authors focused on women loving women and being “oriented” toward them; this act of making women one’s prime commitment (in all forms) became the central component of liberation. Refusing to specify the way women related to one another may have been helpful in discussing their ideas with straight feminists, but it also functioned as a rejection of what they called a “male oriented/dominated structure” which insisted upon defining women entirely through sexual relationships. Shared intimacy could always be exploitative, they noted. But relationships with women were much more likely to be healthy and productive because women could communicate from their shared experiences of subjugation. Building relationships with each other “without fear or guilt” was, they argued, “a necessary part of liberation for all women.”⁶⁴ By leaving the nature of these relationships open-ended GWL created space for all women to participate.

Defining lesbianism as the act of loving or identifying with women was a tricky one that created a movement possible of extremes. Those individuals furthest separated from men, being in some ways further removed from patriarchal dynamics, could be said to be the most legitimate feminists. Lesbians generally had greater capacity to separate from men and dedicate their energies to other women. The more they bound queer identity and liberated womanhood the greater the possibility to claim that lesbians were the natural leaders of feminism. Such associations led some to claim that lesbians were the vanguard of women’s liberation – the only true feminists. This position turned out a number of new woman-identified women but it also heightened tensions among feminists. There also emerged new tensions between those women who came to feminism as “up front lesbians” and those who came out as a matter of political ideology, even when these individual transformations were the hoped for outcome of woman-

⁶⁴ Berkeley Gay Women’s Liberation, “Statement of Gay Women’s Liberation,” in *Lesbians Speak Out*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Women’s Press Collective, 1971), 47-48.

identification. Some saw in this definition the potential for the whole of the women's community to be folded into lesbian feminism. An ambiguous definition of woman-identified relationships meant that many more women could identify as part of the lesbian feminist world than were actually engaging in same-sex sexual relationships. The label offered space for straight and gay women to see themselves as mutually invested in elevating women on their shared journey of dismantling patriarchy.

This capacious interpretation allowed lesbians to claim a legitimate place in the work of women's liberation but it also made possible the papering over of lesbian contributions to feminism. Through the period covered in this study these more expansive terms used to refer to lesbians became the norm, a shift that in some ways blurred the boundaries between women of various sexual practices. It allowed lesbians to find intimate safe spaces in which to explore their sexuality as well as lay claim to a broader community of belonging. Yet these terms placed political emphasis on the shared identity of gender and the shared mission of revolutionizing a sexist society. It also allowed for straight women to embrace the labor their lesbian sisters while continuing to ignore internal and external homophobia. The nature of just what it meant to love women would continue to be negotiated and contested through the movement.

In the work of writing manifestos the lesbian feminism of the San Francisco Bay Area and of New York City developed in a remarkably similar fashion. They shared the same frustrations in trying to work with gay men and (straight) feminists and found resolution in creating their own political groups. Almost simultaneously, west and east, lesbians began a new movement. The New York women penned "Stepin Fetchit Woman" (November 1969), "Gay is Good," (February 1970), "Coitus Interruptus" (February 1970), and "New York All-Women's Dance" (April 1970) before introducing the canonical "Woman-Identified Woman" (May 1970).

Gay Women's Liberation authored "Lesbians Speak Out" (November 1969), "Something it Means to be a Lesbian" (December 1969), "Womanhood: A Call for Self-Determination," (January 1970), "Lesbians as Bogeywomen" (January 1970), and "Statement of Gay Women's Liberation" (March 1970).⁶⁵ And just as the confrontation between the Radicalesbians and (straight) feminism of the Second Congress to Unite Women served as the catalyst for a new movement in New York, so too did an encounter between lesbians and (straight) feminists at the Second Bay Area Women's Coalition Conference announce them to the San Francisco scene. These dual efforts to define lesbianism on their own terms reflect a movement that had not one but multiple sites of origin.⁶⁶

The west coast texts circulated around the nation. GWL members themselves situated their texts alongside those from the Radicalesbians, the Daughters of Bilitis, the Willamette Brigade, and others; they saw their words as part of a conversation that spanned the country.⁶⁷ The works of Gay Women's Liberation and the Radicalesbians received national attention as well, with feminists of other groups placing them in conversation. The summer 1970 Issue of *Women: A Journal of Liberation*, for example, brought the like ideas of these two groups into direct dialogue. *Women* published Judy Grahn's "Perspectives on Lesbianism" (which included selections from "Lesbians and Women" and the full text of "Lesbians as Bogeywoman") alongside "The Woman-Identified Woman." Margaret Blanchard, member of the *Women* collective, detailed the way editors endeavored to showcase "plurality of voice." She explained,

⁶⁵ Each of these texts is reprinted in the Women's Press Collective publication *Lesbians Speak Out*, put together by Gay Women's Liberation in 1970.

⁶⁶ My research indicates these are the earliest such texts, save for the writings discussed in chapter 1 that appeared in DOB's *The Ladder*. The geographical breadth of materials represented in both editions of *Lesbian's Speak Out* supports this interpretation.

⁶⁷ Women of the Free Women's Press, specifically "Carol, Natalie, Ellen and Pat" selected the documents at the end of 1970 to represent the state of the conversation about lesbianism. "Table of Contents," in *Lesbians Speak Out*, 3-4.

“Separate pieces on the same topic speak to each other simply by being placed together.”⁶⁸ The inclusion of these two manifestos in this national publication indicates the influence and reach of both of these pieces. Moreover, their inclusion in *Women* then expanded their range, making them a part a national feminist dialogue that the journal encouraged and fostered.⁶⁹ Further, *GWL’s Lesbians Speak Out* circulated their own texts as well as those of sister organizations. New York DOB, for example, advertised it as an “excellent collection of articles written by gay women.”⁷⁰ Vicki from Macon, Mississippi wrote in to San Francisco DOB’s publication *Sisters* to place her order for the text.⁷¹ These cases demonstrate not only *GWL’s* reach but also the ways in which lesbian feminism as a movement benefited greatly from the ongoing activity of the Daughters of Bilitis.

Lesbian writing proliferated through the decade, but these manifestos continued to be recognized as foundational to lesbian feminist identity even as its characteristics evolved. In 1974 a collective of six women affiliated with the Women’s Press Collective published a second version of *Lesbians Speak Out* (first published in early 1971). While the press hastily pieced together, the second was the product of two and a half years of gathering content and vetting it through thorough discussion and consensus decision-making. Judy Grahn explained that the articles included represented the “germinal” documents of building a lesbian feminist movement. It was meant as a historical record of the first stage of the gay women’s movement. The collective sought submissions from the growing national network of lesbian activists and

⁶⁸ Margaret Blanchard, “Speaking the Plural: The Example of ‘Women: a Journal of Liberation’” in *NWSA Journal* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 88.

⁶⁹ Margaret Blanchard, “Speaking the Plural,” 85.

⁷⁰ “Recent Publication,” *The Lesbian Newsletter, DOB New York* (August 1971): 6.

⁷¹ Letter from Vicki to *Sisters*, March 10, 1972, Box 4/3, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

submitted their own work as well. Wendy Cadden explained that the works included were part of an ongoing dialogue, incomplete ideas still being debated. What is striking is that the most of the submissions new to the second edition were works of poetry. The vast majority of the theoretical work was that which had already been produced by the time of the first edition. Collective member Sunny explained that since the first issue they had “re-evaluated” much of their “politics and ideology.” And yet these manifestoes continued to be recognized as worthy of ongoing exploration.⁷²

Living Lesbian Feminism: Women’s Houses

In conjunction with building GWL, Alice Molloy, Carol Wilson, and Natalie Lando opened their Berkeley home at 2828 Benvenue Street to “radical lesbian renters.”⁷³ Benvenue housed GWL activists and served as headquarters to the group in the East Bay. Wilson and Lando had long been partners, co-parenting Wilson’s son. Together they also had a long history of activism back to the 1950s that included participation in the Daughters of Bilitis with Lando volunteering her time to help produce *The Ladder*.⁷⁴ Wilson and Molloy became lovers in the late sixties, at which time Molloy moved into Benvenue House. This polyamorous relationship was not always an easy one but it was solid and central to the growing lesbian community in the East Bay.⁷⁵ The three women first welcomed in Patricia “Pat” Jackson, another of the GWL

⁷² Judy Grahn, Wendy Cadden, Brenda Crider, Sunny, Jane Lawhon, Anne Leonard, “Six Introductions,” in *Lesbians Speak Out*, 2nd ed. (Oakland: Women’s Press Collective, 1974), np.

⁷³ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 151.

⁷⁴ Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), 39-40.

⁷⁵ Frank discussions of lesbian sexuality and open relationships appear in lesbian feminist memoirs. The roles played by Molloy, Wilson, and Lando as well as by Cadden and Grahn (who had an open relationship) indicate that such dynamics were perfectly acceptable. Grahn explained that while women partnered, there were “very free sexual interactions outside of these commitments.” Los Angeles activist Jeanne Cordova also detailed how she

founders, who moved from San Jose to be more a part of the happenings. The women received notice of eviction within weeks of the house becoming a collective. They responded by purchasing their own home in Oakland (4205 Terrace Street) to which they moved in the fall of 1970.⁷⁶ As Grahn describes it, “The house had four bedrooms and a vast living room big enough to serve as a meeting place and project center, as well as a spacious basement and an attic, which also became living spaces.” Alice managed the collective.⁷⁷ In the spring of 1971 Grahn and Cadden moved across the bay to join the Terrace House, making it an increasingly important hub of GWL activity in the Bay Area.⁷⁸

The Terrace Collective became a principle site of lesbian feminist resources and information. Calling 848-3502, a woman could tap into meetings, services, and social events. They could reach Carol Wilson who taught lessons in automobile repair and helped to support the collective by fixing cars. Individuals and collectives purchased newly printed pamphlets and books from the Woman’s Press Collective, which used the house for East Bay distribution while its base of operation remained in San Francisco. As members of the household worked to better connect activists around the city they encouraged women to report on events and meetings to be added to the Women’s Liberation Newsletter calendar.⁷⁹ Whether as residents or community members, women came and went with great frequency as they collaborated on a host of new

navigated her open relationships in the 1970s. Jeanne Cordova, *When We Were Outlaws*, 29-32 and 130-133; Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 125.

⁷⁶ Grahn places the move in the fall of 1970. The new address was announced in April 1971 in *It Ain’t Me Babe*, the publication coordinated by GWL’s Molloy. Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 152; “Free Women’s Press,” *It Ain’t Me Babe* 2, no. 1 (April 1971): 31.

⁷⁷ Natalie Lando provided the down payment but the house was put in Alice Molloy’s name, as she was believed to be the best of the trio for managing the collective. Lando remained attached to Wilson (and Molloy) but preferred to live alone and thus rented an apartment nearby. Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 152.

⁷⁸ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 150-52.

⁷⁹ “What’s Happening,” *It Ain’t Me Babe* 1, no. 7 (May 31-June 10, 1970): 15.

political and cultural projects. Most residents possessed creative skills that they lent to the movement while also working to translate them into means of supporting themselves. Publishers of the radical feminist paper *It Ain't Me Babe* worked on layout, writers workshopped, and painters and photographers displayed their work.⁸⁰ In these and other women-only, women-centered activities they experienced what it meant to be free of dependence on men and capable of the revolutionary future they envisioned.

The move from the Benvenue House (Berkeley) to the Terrace House (Oakland) coincided with another Berkeley collective taking shape through the work of GWL members. The owner of 1126 Addison Street, “a sister,” offered the house to Brenda Crider and Louise Merrill under an agreement that required them to turn it into a women’s center.⁸¹ In an announcement run in *It Ain't Me Babe* in the summer of 1970, center coordinators detailed an ambitious list of priorities while also asking the women’s community to donate supplies and volunteer time. Organizers wanted to offer “meaningful programs and services” that included “counseling and assistance to women—whether legal, abortion, or vocational.”⁸² The GWL women in residence oversaw the center. Crider and Merrill were partners raising two children together. Joining them as center residents included Naomi Groeschel (who had been present and GWL’s inception), Nancy Chestnut, and Jean Malley. Among the residents and close friends of the house were writers and artists as well as women who “had a practical, craftswoman, hard-hat

⁸⁰ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 153.

⁸¹ Gina, “East Bay Women’s Center,” *It Ain't Me Babe I*, no. 8 (June 11-July 1, 1970): 4; Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 153-4. It is unclear whether she provided it rent-free or at a reduced rate, charging only for the rooms on the second floor used for personal living.

⁸² Gina, “Berkeley Women’s Center...No Man’s Land,” *It Ain't Me Babe I*, no 9 (July 2-23, 1970): 11.

focus.”⁸³ The design of Addison was that of a women’s center but its leadership ensured that a central priority was meeting the needs of local lesbians.

The goals they laid out were nearly exhaustive of feminist needs but the identities of its residents also shaped the center’s work. Crider and Merrill were mothers and therefore made childcare a priority. As they set up the Berkeley Women’s Center they assessed safe play areas and issued calls for child-friendly supplies. Once up and running they created a sliding scale fee system for the child care services that collective members and volunteers provided from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.⁸⁴ The home also included workers in electrical, carpentry, and auto repair professions. In the care of these women, the center became an important site of support and activity for lesbians even as it endeavored to serve a broader community of women. GWL member Laurel decided to organize a weekly open house within a month of the center’s opening. This GWL sponsored event welcomed all women and included “song and dance,” “food and drink,” and “rap groups.”⁸⁵ Instead of relying on “periodic Saturday night parties” as she worked to come out and combat the loneliness she felt, Laurel found it empowering to know that “we have the women’s center to use however we please.” She hoped that the event would grow as women learned of it through expanded advertising. These women, she imagined, must be “looking for an alternative to the bar scene,” a motivation common amongst lesbians at this time. Even in its first month with relatively limited press, fifty women attended. Given that Laurel did not recognize the majority of the women present, it is likely that

⁸³ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 154.

⁸⁴ Gina, “Berkeley Women’s Center...No Man’s Land,” *It Ain’t Me Babe I*, no 9 (July 2-23, 1970): 10-11; “The Women’s Center,” *It Ain’t Me Babe I*, no. 13 (September 4-17, 1970): 16; “Announcements,” *It Ain’t Me Babe I*, no. 13 (September 4-17, 1970): 19.

⁸⁵ “Open House,” *It Ain’t Me Babe I*, no. 12 (August 21-September 3, 1970): 5.

these events provided an effective way to build community and bring new center volunteers and GWL activists into the fold.⁸⁶

Addison coordinators also worked to ensure that the center was widely accessible. In the evenings, the house filled with meetings and social functions. Orientations started immediately upon its July 1970 opening, occurring at 8:00 p.m. on the first Monday and third Tuesday of each month.⁸⁷ In an effort to ensure that the center accommodated women throughout the community the center welcomed “representatives from East Bay Feminists, NOW, the women’s law caucus, Women of the Free Future, Gay Women’s Liberation, the Derby Street women’s commune, and women who hope to do organizing work in Oakland” to collaborate on center structure and priorities.⁸⁸ Addison also supported these groups by providing them with a meeting space. By September, GWL began using the center for a Wednesday night gay women’s rap.⁸⁹ For this event they expanded their advertising to the gay press to reach gay women who were not yet tuned into the feminist community.⁹⁰ Regular fundraisers and gatherings included art shows and poetry readings. These events provided artists with a space to gain confidence and experience so that they might be able to make a living from their work, while also allowing them to use their talents to advance the movement. Coordinators also reached beyond the bay to expand feminist connections, such as when they invited Sacramento Women’s Liberation to a gathering in

⁸⁶ Laurel, no title, *It Ain’t Me Babe 1*, no. 13 (September 4-17, 1970): 7.

⁸⁷ “Directory,” *It Ain’t Me Babe 1*, no. 12 (August 21-September 3, 1970): 13.

⁸⁸ Gina, “Berkeley Women’s Center...No Man’s Land,” *It Ain’t Me Babe 1*, no. 9 (July 2-23, 1970): 10.

⁸⁹ “Inside Out” *It Ain’t Me Babe 1*, no. 13 (September 4-17, 1970): 7.

⁹⁰ “Gay Women’s Rap” in *Gay Sunshine 1*, no. 3 (October 1970): 17.

Berkeley with NOW, East Bay Feminists, and the staff of *It Ain't Me Babe*.⁹¹ It was a space in which the full spectrum of feminists could gather.

Housing collectives flourished throughout the Bay Area women's community and well beyond. They provided feminists of all identities with a safe space to explore their politics. Living in this way placed restrictions upon how women structured their heterosexual relationships, but (straight) feminists did build their own collective living arrangements. *It Ain't Me Babe* grew out of a feminist collective that was not lesbian-identified. Students at UC Berkeley, Bonnie Eisenberg, Peggy White, and Starr Goode moved in together and created the Women's Basement Press Collective to produce *Babe*. While still producing *Babe* Eisenberg joined another (straight) feminist collective with noted women's press pioneer Alta but ultimately left to live with her boyfriend.⁹² Jane Lawhon struggled with coming out and getting involved in GWL which made her feel "distance from" the (straight) collective she lived in.⁹³ As already discussed, the Terrace House and Addison House were decidedly lesbian, filled with GWL members whose lesbian identities were well established prior to the rise of women-identification. Some housed both lesbians and straight women, such as Sandy Boucher's Bernal Heights house. These residents collectively raised two children together and published the women's paper *Motherlode*. Others emerged with specific purposes in mind, such as Pat Parker's Cole Street collective meant to support lesbians of color. And still others grew out of specific feminist projects. Laura Brown and Barbara Hoke moved to Oakland to open a women's health

⁹¹ Sacramento Women's Liberation Newsletter, 1970, Box 19/03, Sally Wagner Papers, California State University, Sacramento Special Collections and University Archives, Sacramento.

⁹² Bonnie Eisenberg, "It Ain't Me Babe: From Feminist Radicals to Radical Feminists," in *Voices From the Underground: Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, Part 2*, Ken Wachberger ed. (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 385-408.

⁹³ Judy Grahn, Wendy Cadden, Brenda Crider, Sunny, Jane Lawhon, Anne Leonard, "Six Introductions," *Lesbians Speak Out*, 2nd ed., np.

center that doubled as a home for them and another lesbian couple.⁹⁴ These houses blossomed throughout the Bay Area and in other urban centers as well as in rural towns where country women took the idea of separatism as far as they were able.⁹⁵ Collective living was a visible demonstration of a woman's ability to live without male support.

Housing collectives were a way to immerse oneself in the work of lesbian feminism and ensure the practical support necessary to do so. They offered a pragmatic way of knitting together politics and the day to day. Sharing households and expenses meant that members were able to live more economically. Support occurred internally, of course, but also came from outside sources. Judy Grahn recalls that spare clothing was left on the front steps of the Terrace House and food was donated as well. A women's economy developed among the Bay Area's various women's collectives, organizations, and individuals. This arrangement cut down on the extraneous work each woman had to do to support herself, resulting in greater ability focus on the movement. It also functioned as a more egalitarian system with each woman contributing what she was able (money, labor, and so on) so that greater participation of poor and working class women became possible.⁹⁶ With the movement as the central focus and unifying force, barriers between different parts of women's lives blurred. Women commonly shared residential and work collectives. In late 1972, for example, of the thirteen women who belonged to the Women's Press Collective, about half lived at Terrace House. At least two others who live there opened A Woman's Place Bookstore, which shared a building with the press. The arrangement

⁹⁴ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 150-163.

⁹⁵ Rural collectives allowed women to take separatism further than most city women and are likely what people envision when confronted with the idea of lesbian separatism. Living on the land apart from anyone other than lesbian-identified members created unique opportunity to explore life relatively free of male influence, even if for only limited periods of time. A number of these communities formed in northern California through the 1970s and often held ties to the Bay Area. Lesbian feminist professor Sally Gearhart, for example, purchased land with a number of other women in Willits, California. Country Women built their home in Albion.

⁹⁶ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 151; 167-170.

helped to keep women accountable and actively engaged in their movement work. The houses, then, supported the work collectives (discussed below).

While offering practical benefits, they also provided the opportunity to radically reevaluate structures believed to be at the center of women's oppression, including family, labor, and class. They were a rejection of the private nuclear family home that gained heavily gendered meanings in the Cold War years. As women-only spaces, save the occasional male child, these living arrangements queered domestic relationships. Turnover was high and residents came and went, but the women in these collectives understood them as a commitment. Members had to work out for themselves, free of traditional roles, how the home would function. Collectives varied in how they experimented with and rejected heteronormative institutions and reshaped the meanings of family and home. Some rejected the notion of biological parentage and shared in the child rearing responsibilities. Often they rejected monogamy and experimented with polyamory and open relationships. They also worked to reject capitalist values and divorce financial contributions from value or power. Determining how to support themselves forced critical evaluation of class backgrounds. Through whatever arrangements they made to achieve subsistence, they demonstrated to themselves glimpses of what it could mean to live in an egalitarian society. Members empowered themselves and one another as they adopted traditionally "male" skills and roles. Grahn explained of her time at Terrace House, "I consider living there one of the greatest privileges and learning experiences of my life, because I got to participate in helping to formulate a particular kind of revaluation—a women's revolution. Only a few precious times in history have women been in a position to separate from the rest of society in order to describe the world as we see it, and to change it for our needs."⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 153.

Living together as part of the lesbian feminist project also meant that the process of making meaning was one that was always at work. This sometimes took its toll. Some collectives had long runs. The Terrace House ran as a collective throughout the seventies. Rural collectives started in this period operate to this day. Sally Gearhart, for example, continues to live on the land she and other women built their own houses on in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet many forays into this type of living ended quickly, collapsing under the intensity of experimental living. Brenda Crider wrote eloquently about the beauty of the promise these spaces posed as well as the pain that came from not being adequately prepared for the work needed to sustain them. She described “the dreams, the discussions, the love-making, the glorious hero actions we all went on—all of it is beautiful.” The struggles of her polyamorous relationship and fighting with her partner affected the entire collective. Her intimate relationships were not the only ones to create conflict, as “people chose lovers as easily as they went to the bathroom.” And yet ultimately it was the prioritization of political ideals over self-care that left her and others in the house feeling raw and exhausted. At the end of her two years in a collective she felt “like a cut up, abused, palpitating little girl; full of life, still, but more afraid to live it.”⁹⁸ Collectives demonstrated that a different way of living was possible, if not always desirable.

Even when these homes were short lived or taxing experiences, they contributed in significant ways to building the lesbian movement locally and nationally. Collectives were visible, accessible sites for community-building. Newspaper layouts blanketed bedrooms. Fundraising dinners took over kitchens. Dances and poetry readings provided artists with a venue to share their work and facilitated the growth of women’s culture. And on rare occasion, one might find a room off limits because a couple of rescued lab animals became temporary

⁹⁸ Brenda Crider, “We Tried to Do It,” in *Lesbians Speak Out*, 2nd ed., 141-142.

residents.⁹⁹ They brought women to California and connected California to national community. As women traveled the country and migrated to new cities with dreams of a new kind of lesbian existence, these homes provided an easy landing spot: “households were centers for ongoing radical activity, as women poured into California from all over the country and parts of world, looking for methods and new theories of social change.” In 1972, for example, two women identified as being from the east coast had settled into the Terrace House.¹⁰⁰ A New Yorker had the “name of friend” when she and her lover decided to move to the city. When she reached out, the friend was “living in a house with a lot of other lesbians.” It was through them they found roommates, activist opportunities, and social connections.¹⁰¹ They were also places from which Bay Area activists launched their own travel to share their politics, their art, and their skills.¹⁰² In these collectives, private and public merged and women held full authority over determining the meanings of their experiences. The San Francisco Bay Area was a vital part of this experimentation with members of Gay Women’s Liberation assembling some of the first lesbian feminist collectives in the country.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 151-152.

¹⁰⁰ Judy Grahn, Letter to Coletta Reid and Casey Czarnik, Box 5/6, Diana Press Records (Collection 2135), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

¹⁰¹ Deborah Goleman Wolf, *The Lesbian Community, with an Afterword, 1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 76.

¹⁰² Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 162.

¹⁰³ It is worth noting that these houses flourished well before the Furies Collective formed. The Furies continue to be the most well-known lesbian collective, with its former headquarters recently added to the National Register of Historic Places by the National Park Service. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/national-park-service-adds-two-lgbt-sites-to-national-register-of-historic-places/2016/05/04/a715596c-1215-11e6-81b4-581a5c4c42df_story.html. Accessed 7/7/16.

Building Woman-Identified Spaces

Lesbian feminists quite literally lived at the center of a new movement. The most active in shaping it found each aspect of their lives wrapped up in the activity. The energy of these first years of lesbian feminism sent activists scattering across the Bay Area celebrating women's culture and tackling political issues from new perspectives, making lesbians visible as a significant collective force. In their homes, during meetings, and poetry meetings, at dances and in independent presses, they witnessed an ongoing hunger for information and the need for collective belonging. Together, Judy Grahn and Wendy Cadden, and Alice Molloy and Carol Wilson, contemplated how they might translate their interests into means of drawing women together locally and nationally.¹⁰⁴ In considering how to do this they made use of personal relationships, political conferences, and women's publications, thus contributing to a growing national network as they worked in service of the local. For Grahn and Cadden, this manifested in a printing press. For Molloy and Wilson, it was a distribution service turned bookstore. I discuss the inspirations for and early efforts to create these projects here as they demonstrate the trajectory of Gay Women's Liberation. Both get further attention in chapter 3 as demonstrations of the growth of project activism at mid-decade.

Judy Grahn's literary interests, as well as her role in writing and distributing early lesbian manifestos, helped her develop the idea of creating a women's press. She and partner Wendy

¹⁰⁴Conferences provided small, informal groups (which lesbian feminist organizations often were) to build connections that helped spread information and create national support networks. But it was the personal relationships at these events that often really knit together a national lesbian network. In speaking of the 1971 Gay Women's West Coast Conference, Jeanne Cordova detailed her experiences housing women from Albuquerque, Minneapolis, Berkeley, and Austin and explained that it was here that they really "built a sisterhood." Jeanne Cordova, "Sisterhood and Non-Sisterhood at the Gay Women's West Coast Conference," in *Everywoman 2*, no 10 (July 9, 1971): np. The reach of grassroots publications is apparent, for example, in the documents included in *Lesbians Speak Out*. Documents were borrowed from Berkeley's feminist *It Ain't Me Babe*, New York's gay *Come Out!* and radical *Rat*, Iowa City's lesbian feminist *Ain't I a Woman*, and Portland's radical *Willamette Bridge*.

Cadden created the Women's Press Collective.¹⁰⁵ It began rather simply. Movement women struggled to lay their hands on literature so Grahn began collecting and circulating texts at GWL and women's liberation meetings. She witnessed activists "avidly" reading anything she could contribute.¹⁰⁶ In a society that offered women little access to positive representations of women's relationships with each other, they were hoping to provide answers the question, "What does it mean to love women?" These writings included her poetry and GWL manifestos, as well as those works by east coast activists Martha Shelley (Radicalesbians) and Rita Mae Brown (Radicalesbians and the Furies). Reactions to her efforts inspired Grahn and Cadden to conceive of *Woman to Woman*, an anthology of poetry collected by Grahn (including her own) and art designed by Cadden. *Woman to Woman* was to be a way to "change the images and therefore the way women thought about themselves."¹⁰⁷ Gay Women's Liberation pooled money to purchase a mimeograph machine and by the end of summer 1970 they began to distribute the press's first book. They advertised the availability of women's liberation materials via *It Ain't Me Babe* as early as May 1970.¹⁰⁸

The press collective drew energy from Grahn and Cadden's lesbian network. As they built their press they developed the feminist basis for this project and indicated movement towards a separatist ethos. Women found in this new endeavor the joy of being able to publish

¹⁰⁵ While initially titled The Free Women's Press, I use Women's Press Collective throughout for the sake of clarity.

¹⁰⁶ In early 1970 the only available books were those that had already been in circulation, such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. A small number of pamphlets and articles were beginning to circulate, with a number of the early canonical writings being reproduced through the New England Free Press. This included Anne Koedt's "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" and Beverly Jones and Judith Brown's "Toward a Women's Liberation Movement." The Women's Liberation Basement Press, located in Berkeley, was just beginning to circulate a few pamphlets. An impressively comprehensive list was included in the first issue of *It Ain't Me Babe*. But even with texts from around the country it filled scarcely a half page. "Read," *It Ain't Me Babe* 1, no. 1 (January 1970); 7.

¹⁰⁷ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 131.

¹⁰⁸ "What's Happening," *It Ain't Me Babe* 1, no. 7 (May 21, 1970): 15.

exactly what they wanted at any time without women's work passing through the hands of men. The founding members (a number of whom, but not all, came from GWL) believed that no men should play a role in publishing movement material. Men should not, they argued, benefit in any way from the movement. The collective declared, "Women should have control over what is representative of our own movement."¹⁰⁹ They were also rightly concerned that traditional commercial entities would not see the value in their work and would not make it readily available to movement women. The press collective meant that they did not have to compromise their woman-identified principles in deciding what to print. It also created a way for women to build skills that the movement needed and could become a source of professional and financial support.

It only took a couple of months for the press collective to speed into production and make itself known around the Bay Area. By the end of October 1970 they had ten titles available for purchase and several more in queue. Women's poetry featured prominently among these first titles, including poems by GWL founding member Red Arobateau.¹¹⁰ The press also contributed to the broader women's movement by publishing "a very comprehensive directory" of women's liberation groups and two titles that explored the purpose and function of the small group.¹¹¹ One of these was *Free Space*, which women used around the country as a guide to create their own groups. This was the second edition of Pam Allen's booklet that had been originally printed by the Women's Liberation Basement Press Collective. Shameless Hussy Press preceded these women's presses, a pioneering feminist press begun by Alta in 1969 as a means of printing her

¹⁰⁹ "Announcements: Free Women's Press," *It Ain't Me Babe* 2, no. 1 (April 1971): 31.

¹¹⁰ "Free Women's Press," *It Ain't Me Babe* 1, no. 16 (October 30, 1970): 15.

¹¹¹ "Free Women's Press," *It Ain't Me Babe* 1, no. 16 (October 30, 1970): 15.

own poetry.¹¹² With little funding and no formal space to house their work, running on volunteer labor and community support, these presses pioneered the movement for women-produced literature. The Women's Press Collective was thus one of the first women's presses and arguably the first lesbian feminist press in the country.

These early accomplishments inspired in the collective a confidence in their ability to use this press to be of service to the movement and to build an audience for their work. Members Judy Grahn and Ann Leonard organized a trip east for the fall of 1970 to train in printing with the New England Free Press. These months away from the Bay Area brought them a new level of knowledge about printing to share with the women back home. But it was also an invaluable period of networking and making San Francisco lesbian feminism known to their east coast sisters. Copies of *Women to Women* travelled with the women as a means of making money while on the road. This built national demand for Women's Press Collective materials. They attended the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention in Washington, D.C. and made new friendships that included future members of the Furies Collective. Grahn and Leonard returned home at the end of the year to find that the collective secured a loan and arranged to purchase a printing press from poet Diane DiPrima. They began the new year able to create higher quality prints at greater volume.

The press had the intended results, providing a source of training and making women's materials available to a national readership. In the back of a Valencia Street storefront the collective turned the work of learning to repair and operate the large and complex press into a labor of love.¹¹³ The repair man they hired said he would complete the labor only if one of the

¹¹² Barbara J. Love, ed., *Feminists Who Changed America, 1963-1965* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 11-12.

¹¹³ Valencia Street would become home to San Francisco's lesbian community in the 1980s and 1990s.

collective members offered him sex, solidifying their resolve to do all the work themselves.¹¹⁴ Thus began a long process of self-education. Training happened throughout the production of Grahn's *Edward the Dyke and other Poems*, for sale by March 1971. The first to purchase copies was a future member of the Furies, D.C. based Coletta Reid. When the Furies published the first issue of their newspaper they included a selection from "Edward the Dyke."¹¹⁵ Through 1971 the production continued on Valencia but when Grahn and Cadden moved across the bay the Terrace House they made it the press's business headquarters. Situating the work within the living collective helped to bring more women into the process and for Grahn and Cadden to share their passions with their artist housemates. Moving the press into a shared space with a new women's bookstore at the start of 1972 would further expand its reach.¹¹⁶

The Women's Press Collective built a strong reputation for west coast lesbian feminism. Rita Mae Brown, for example, wrote to Del Martin about sharing her copy of *Woman to Woman* with her D.C. sisters and explained, "Everyone is excited about it." She speculated that it might "accomplish more" than some of the heavier, "boring political magazines." She got her copy at the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention from "women from a California newspaper."¹¹⁷ This connection being established, it is not surprising that Coletta Reid arrived at the Women's Press Collective in early 1971 to carry off a stack of *Edward the Dyke and Other*

¹¹⁴ "Free Women's Press," *It Ain't Me Babe* 2, no. 1 (April 1971): 31.

¹¹⁵ Judy Grahn, "Edward the Dyke and Other Poems," *The Furies* 1, no. 1 (January 1972): 2.

¹¹⁶ "Announcements: Free Women's Press," *It Ain't Me Babe* 2, no. 1 (April 1971): 31.

¹¹⁷ Rita Mae Brown to Del Martin, 2 December 1970, Box 26/8, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco. By this point in 1970 the women of the Terrace House were actively contributing to *It Ain't Me Babe* and the Berkeley Women's Center provided its business address. There was therefore little separation between paper, press, distribution, and home. This likely explains Brown's memory that she purchased *Woman to Woman* from newspaper women.

Poems or that Grahn's work would show up in *The Furies* publication.¹¹⁸ In these feminist networks, Grahn became increasingly important to lesbian feminist politics across the country. By 1976 in a letter to Charlotte Bunch about the San Francisco response to a growing national conflict surrounding the Feminist Economic Network, Nancy Stockwell explained that "anytime anyone sees the name Judy Grahn out here they sit up and listen." Grahn's statement on the issue was influential because, as a woman had recently commented to Stockwell, "Judy has impeccable credentials."¹¹⁹ In a hostile national dialogue Grahn's perspective on the events carried weight because of how well known her words had become and the respect with which she was held in lesbian feminist (and broader feminist) communities.

Just as Grahn and Cadden envisioned ways to produce women's print materials, Molloy and Wilson envisioned how they might expand access in northern California and around the country. This was not an endeavor separate from the press. Housemates at Terrace Street shared dreams of a women's bookstore. An opportunity to experiment with one possible approach came through the collective efforts of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Women's Press Collective, and GWL women Carol Wilson, Pat Jackson, and Naomi Groeschel.¹²⁰ Coordinated travel to the Midwest occasioned the chance to implement their ideas by creating an informal distribution service. Their plans for this trip included spending time with local women to discuss the literature as well as building distribution networks.¹²¹ In a van that Carol herself repaired for the trip, they traveled as far as the Michigan selling women's literature.

¹¹⁸ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 146.

¹¹⁹ Nancy Stockwell, Letter to Charlotte Bunch, December 2, 1976, Box 1/14, Nancy Stockwell Papers, James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center, San Francisco Public Library.

¹²⁰ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 135.

¹²¹ The Mime Troupe scheduled ten shows between October 31st and November 24th, 1970. It took them through Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Minnesota, Michigan, and Ohio. "Here It Is and There They Go," *It Ain't Me*

The interest they witnessed on this trip solidified their desire to create a more formal, lasting structure and the small pool of funds they raised set them on the road to opening Information Center Incorporate: A Women's Place Bookstore ("a woman's place" short for "a woman's place is in the world"). Alice Molloy and Carol Wilson spearheaded this project, which functioned as a collective that included Carol's partner Natalie Lando, as well as "Nancy Cook, Gretchen Milne, Rosalie, Starr, and Marianne Perron."¹²² The women shared personal relationships created through housing collectives and laboring together on *It Ain't Me Babe*.¹²³ Doors opened at the corner of College and Broadway in Oakland in January 1972. The name spoke volumes. "ICI" stood for Information Center Incorporate, highlighting their desire to be a hub for information on the women's movement. The bookstore was a woman-identified space, discouraging any male presence but open to all women. It functioned as a key site of lesbian feminist activity until it closed over a decade later.¹²⁴ A study of women's resources around the country said of the bookstore in 1973 that it is was "the largest, best-stocked feminist bookstore in the United States." Alice Molloy explained to the creators of the resource guide that A Woman's Place was "a Women's Center disguised as a bookstore."¹²⁵ It included meeting space and a café, the Women's Press Collective, and all manner of community news via wall-to-

Babe 1, no.15 (October 8, 1970): 8; "San Francisco Mime Troupe," *It Ain't Me Babe 1*, no. 16 (October 30, 1970): 6.

¹²² Finding Aid, A Woman's Place Bookstore Records, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹²³ How to Start a Bookstore, 1974, Box 1/2, A Woman's Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

¹²⁴ A conflict between original collective members and those who joined later occurred in a very public dispute in 1982. Mediation and litigation resulted in Molloy Wilson losing all rights to the collective. Without their labor the store last less than two years. Wilson and Molloy went on to open a new bookstore in Oakland, Mama Bears, which was in business for 20 years, from 1983 to 2003.

¹²⁵ Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie, *The New Woman's Survival Catalog: A Woman-made Book* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1973), 23.

wall bulletin boards. The bookstore thus became a stable, reliable place for Bay Area women looking not only for reading material but for social events, political actions, and resources. A center of feminist and lesbian feminist activity, A Woman's Place is taken up further in chapter 3.

The bookstore and press demonstrate the value of working collectives, which provided lesbians with a way to rethink the meanings of women's labor and explore alternatives to lifework. Further, they declared that women had the right to claim public space all their own. Grahn highlights the significance of this work in speaking to GWL accomplishments: "our acquisition of public space for women. I don't think you can stress that enough, for how important that was."¹²⁶ This visibility was a statement to society at large as much as it was a means of making the movement visible to women. As with the residential collectives, they also brought women to California and knit the west coast together with other regions of the country. Carol Seajay discovered the California lesbian feminist scene through the 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference and soon relocated to the Bay Area. She trained at A Woman's Place bookstore before opening her own in San Francisco. When *The New Women's Survival Catalog* accidentally reported that A Woman's Place produced a guide to opening a bookstore, the collective wrote one to meet the demands for such information pouring in from around the country. These projects began as and would at their core always function as separatist projects, facilitating a way for woman-identified women to work with one another. And yet as they grew and gained importance to the broader women's community they came into greater contact with and gained significant importance to (straight) feminists. In countless ways, the pioneering projects of the Bay Area would contribute to the growth of lesbian feminism nationally.

¹²⁶ Judy Grahn, Interview with the author, February 28, 2014.

Conclusion: Practices and Transitions

Gay Women's Liberation was a process through which members defined lesbian feminism as an ideology and a movement. It began with manifestos that examined the oppression lesbians faced in a patriarchal society and speculated as to what embracing their womanhood could mean for liberation. They proposed that the path to liberation lay in committing oneself entirely to other women, relating as equals to uplift sisters and create an egalitarian social system. The movement welcomed experimentation in each and every area of women's lives. A significant part of this process began with liberating women from patriarchal language. They had to break free from a misogynistic system of making meaning in order to determine on their own terms what it meant to create change in ways that did not replicate the hierarchal society in which they lived. One activist spoke of wanting time for nothing more than reading, explaining "before I act to make big changes in the world, I want to better understand how best I can cause freedom."¹²⁷ Through the group's first year, GWL members embarked upon such a process. This exploration brought them to "women-loving women," a concept that opened lesbianism to all feminists willing to make the liberation of sisters their life's work. At the core of this journey was a community of women-loving women who lived entirely within the lesbian feminist movement; this totality meant a blurring of boundaries between political, social, and cultural experiences. With an entire system complicit in oppressing women, lesbian feminists opted to work outside of it in order to determine what an egalitarian society would look like. Each enterprise was politically motivated, designed to challenge social structures and revolutionize how women could live their lives.

Cultural events showcased lesbian creativity and provided the opportunity to celebrate a new womanhood. Dances hosted in housing collectives or community centers were a common

¹²⁷ Judy x, "no title," *It Ain't Me Babe I*, no. 12 (August 21-September 3, 1971): 12.

alternative to the bar scene. Readings of feminist materials were particularly common early on as they provided another way to share information. GWL members Judy Grahn and Pat Parker often appeared together for poetry readings, sharing work that explored sexuality, gender, race, and class politics. Their words were powerfully eye-opening to women trying to find their way in women's liberation and feel empowered to explore their sexuality. Relating to this lesbian art in women-only spaces provided revelatory experiences for many. Laurel Galena wrote about her process of discovery in which she began to believe that "love for a sister cannot stop short of her body." She explained that these settings helped women "feel related to our gay sisters—digging their poetry."¹²⁸ The celebration of queer desires pushed many women to explore new possibilities. These same spaces provided a rich environment in which women could find others with whom they could form new relationships. Lesbians discovered what it meant to actually have and be able to celebrate one's own culture. In turn, these cultural components of lesbian feminism helped to expand their community and encourage political commitment to women's liberation.

The political implications of such exploration were not lost on those in the women's movement; increased lesbian visibility in the women's community pushed many to consider whether sexuality was a component of the "right" or "best" way to be a feminist. A life path that came with total dedication to other women and separation from men seemed the ultimate commitment to women's liberation. For some, women-identification facilitated discovery of a genuine queer desire. Other women liberationists struggled to know what to do with sexual desires when unable to find "non-chauvinistic males." A woman who identified herself as "solanas II" explained, "I haven't found the right man because in this country he does not exist."

¹²⁸ Laurel, "Stepping Stones," *It Ain't Me Babe I*, no. 10 (July 25-August 5, 1970): 7.

For her and for others this was a difficult exploration. Still identifying as heterosexual, she was “trying relationships with other women” but it was not yet “The Answer” to her search for fulfillment.¹²⁹ Among some, then, lesbianism became ideologically informed and wholly a political alternative to relating to men. This political lesbianism could be sexual or celibate. Historians have documented the explosion of lesbianism within the women’s movement, even going so far as to indicate that straight women became a class discriminated against in various feminist circles.¹³⁰ Many women found purchase in this idea of lesbian vanguardism. Lesbians introduced sexuality as a component of feminist identity by creating the notion of women-identification but it was the act of straight women choosing women-identification that helped to shift lesbianism into a vanguardist position.¹³¹

Yet significant aversion to lesbianism also remained. It is true that the 1970s witnessed a proliferation of lesbian experimentation. The rise of concepts like “nouveau lesbianism” and “political lesbianism” indicates that a significant number of women were taking up and trying on a (sometimes sexual) woman-loving identity. The growth of lesbian feminism as its own movement indicates the appeal of this vanguardist identity. The longevity of a separate lesbian feminist politics, however, indicates that (straight) feminism remained averse to being too closely associated with homosexuality. This ongoing divide indicates the need for caution in evaluating the influence of lesbian vanguardism. Personal hesitations and resentments among straight women were often at play. At a Bay Area gay and women’s liberation conference a

¹²⁹ solanas II “untitled letter,” *It Ain’t Me Babe 1*, no. 12 (August 21-September 3, 1970): 15.

¹³⁰ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 164-175.

¹³¹ Sociologist Deborah Goleman Wolf, in her pioneering (if flawed) study of lesbianism in the Bay Area, suggests that it was heterosexual women who established the vanguard nature of lesbian feminism. This is not to say that no lesbians declared their superior feminist credentials or that they were not complicit in the construction of vanguardist ideas. Rather, vanguardism could not have developed without straight women who found purchase in such ideas. Deborah Wolf, *The Lesbian Community*, 66.

number of straight women expressed their dismay at the rise of women-identification making them feel puritanical. When lesbianism was offered as a solution to their conflicted politics “the women said there was some talk of this, but most hetero women felt afraid to try lesbianism.”¹³² These women considered lesbianism a political strategy while others believed that inclusion of lesbianism in the women’s movement compromised “true” feminist issues.

Did lesbian feminists intend to build themselves up as the vanguard of liberation politics when creating the concept of women-identification? The GWL manifestos are not clear on this. Their emphasis was on breaking down norms that kept women apart and asserting the naturalness of women loving each other (in whatever form that occurred). They also spoke of working in cooperation with “heterosexual” women, seeing GWL as allied with women’s liberation. In their view women ought to explore their feelings for one another without the barriers of patriarchy limiting them but they did not issue a call for all to become lesbians. Does this mean that they did not feel lesbianism was essential to liberation? Or, were they preserving this elite position for themselves? Given the overall tenor of their texts and their call for cooperation with women’s liberation, the former seems more likely.¹³³ Thus the utility of a concept like “woman-identification.” GWL members felt that their personal journeys required freedom from relating to men and working within lesbian-only collectives. They recognized that women had different journeys to take to liberation. Yet as I explore in the coming chapters, this separatism did not mean separating themselves off from the broader women’s community.

Resentments did exist among gay women who pioneered lesbian feminism in ways that complicated their vision. The path towards a woman-centered movement was not an easy one. In

¹³² “Gay Lib Stirs Up Fem Lib,” *Berkeley Barb* 12, no. 1 (Jan 2-8, 1970): 3.

¹³³ These ideas are discussed in “Lesbians as Women,” “Lesbians as Bogeywomen,” “Womanhood: A Call for Self-Determination,” all published in *Lesbians Speak Out* (first and second editions).

part the shift towards separatism was a response to frustrations with straight feminists who continued to direct energy towards men. Such judgements could limit the capacity of feminists to build relationships across divides of sexual orientation. Tensions also arose between those who were newly woman-identified and those activists whose homosexuality preceded their feminism. Among GWL founders discovered their sexuality through a personal journey rather than through political motivations. They did so with little information and few resources. Political lesbianism as a “gesture of solidarity seemed somewhat oppressive and superficial” to women who had struggled through the process of coming out sans the support of the gay women’s movement.¹³⁴ These sentiments were at odds with hoping to build outward from a women-centered movement to bring about revolution. Judy Grahn detailed the conflict when “three idealistic young white college graduates” joined the Women’s Press Collective as newly lesbian-identified, their sexuality a “political choice for liberation from male supremacy.” Working alongside these new members helped those who believed they were born gay to develop “more sophisticated ideas.”¹³⁵ An unnamed author, writing in *Babe* in 1971, argued that both sides, straight and gay, judged one another. She contested the idea that gay women declared their own vanguardism, though she recognized behaviors that could be read as vanguardist. Gay women did “at times subtly [put] down women who relate to men. But they also continued to feel “put down” in women’s liberation.¹³⁶ So while there is little indication in this period that Bay Area lesbians avowedly declared themselves the true leaders of feminism, dynamics between straight and lesbian feminisms at times indicated a vanguardist sensibility.

¹³⁴ Deborah Goleman Wolf, *The Lesbian Community*, 67.

¹³⁵ Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 159.

¹³⁶ “Your Experience-Existence is Different form my Experience-Existence,” *It Ain’t Me Babe* 2, no. 1 (April 1971): 12.

Lesbianism proved divisive even without gay women declaring their superiority. Participation of up-front lesbians in women's liberation was enough to produce conflict. Lesbian visibility and lesbian assertion of political legitimacy strained blended women's groups. Such an occurrence played out through the life cycle of *It Ain't Me Babe*. Initially published by Berkeley Women's Liberation, the *Babe* collective separated from the group when members tried to interfere in editorial decisions while not actually contributing to production in any way. Through this period of rupture a number of GWL women became involved in the paper and *Babe* began to use the Berkeley Women's Center (Addison House) as its business headquarters. At the same time the paper changed its overall format with women responsible for their own pages rather than collaborating on all content. This sparked the inclusion of "The Women's Page," in which a number of women critiqued *Babe* and Bay Area women's liberation. Bonnie Eisenberg, paper founder, said that the alienation felt by these women was a matter of class dynamics. Parental status also appears to have been an issue in the conflict. Yet sexuality was also significant. The Women's Page collective critiqued "some of the staff" for "reveling in their nouveau homosexuality." They defined lesbianism as "a hip groovy acid life style (sic) which automatically rules us poor slobs with jobs or children out into the ranks of the uptight straights. They top it off with a pornographic cover of three women rubbing up against each other all in the name of feminism."¹³⁷ In the aftermath of such attacks *Babe* demonstrated its lesbian leanings by asking The Women's Page collective to leave, which only served to shore up the resentments. The *Babe* collective broke apart at the end of 1970. Member Trina Robbins left because she felt alienated as a straight woman, suggesting that the membership was primarily lesbian. Members of "The Women's Page" went on to publish their own paper and issue heavy critiques of the

¹³⁷ "The Women's Page," *It Ain't Me Babe* 1, no 11 (August 6-20, 1970): 15. The cover in question is from issue 1, number 10. It is a drawing of three women, fully clothed, dancing in tight embrace.

entire Bay Area women's liberation movement with accusations of elitism and exclusionary politics. And yet their characterization of lesbians cannot be ignored. For some in the movement simply including lesbians was a threat to their own political legitimacy.

In spite of tensions within (straight) feminism these years witnessed a more complete separation from the gay movement. Lesbian feminism both highlighted and produced the growing distance between lesbians and gay men. This separation was made possible in part by having the women's movement to look to when alliances were necessary. Among Bay Area lesbians many objected to their male counterparts making "gay" into a "synonym for male homosexual." They saw no purpose in working alongside those who only thought of liberation from the perspective of the needs of gay men, expecting lesbians to share their labor while ignoring the sexism lesbians faced on the path to liberation. One lesbian activist responded, "When you deal with the sexism of your gay 'brotherhood' and recognize that your liberation isn't worth shit at the expense of gay women's continuing subjugation—then I will call you brother."¹³⁸ More than political issues were at play. Lesbian feminists commonly objected to gay cultural practices such as "camp," an activity which they believed "degrades and insults gay women."¹³⁹ This rejection of gay brotherhood was not limited to Gay Women's Liberation. Del Martin shook the national gay community when she published "If that's All There Is." She issued this document as a farewell to gay men after fifteen years of trying to get them to pay attention to the needs of gay women. When gay men critiqued Martin for not offering a solution, she pointed out that irony of such a response. She argued that it was time that they take on responsibility for this relationship by reading lesbian and women's liberation literature, being

¹³⁸ Zaharah, "Letter," *Gay Sunshine* 1, no. 4 (December 1970): 7.

¹³⁹ Zaharah, "Letter," *Gay Sunshine* 1, no. 4 (December 1970): 7.

respectful in how they speak of their sisters, and actively reaching out to lesbians.¹⁴⁰ Her statement highlighted the sexism and “egocentricity” she found typical of the gay movement. She concluded by emphasizing a common lesbian feminist critique of gay men – that they prioritized sexual pleasure over political commitment: “I leave each of you to your own device. Take care of it, stroke it gently, mouth it and fondle it. As the center of your consciousness, it’s really all you have.”¹⁴¹ The severity of her words indicates just how significant the rift between them had become. In this phase of lesbian feminism its activists solidified their allegiance to the women’s movement while also moving towards greater commitment towards separatism.

Gay Women’s Liberation was an active part of constructing national ties that facilitated such cooperation and the move toward making Lesbian Nation a reality. The creation of GWL was in itself groundbreaking. GWL founder Judy Grahn and bookwoman Carol Seajay reflected of the group: “that was the very first lesbian separatist group of our generation on the West Coast who organized around a political basis.”¹⁴² In bringing women together and giving them common cause, by inspiring women to take action and dream of what might be, GWL prompted the rise of institutions that would support lesbian feminism in the Bay Area through the coming decade. It did not do this in a vacuum; rather, it did so in conjunction with similar efforts around the country. This work proved essential to the creation of relationships that shaped the movement through the following decade. Consider how early actions brought women together. Judy Grahn and Ann Leonard were accepted to a training program at an east coast press and traveled across the country with Carol Wilson, Naomi Groeschel, and Pat Jackson, who were distributing

¹⁴⁰ Del Martin, “What Can We Do?” *San Francisco Free Press* 1, no. 10 (May 1970): 6.

¹⁴¹ Del Martin, “If That’s All There Is,” *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, eds. Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan (New York: Routledge, 1997), 355.

¹⁴² Carol Seajay, “Some Beginnings: An Interview with Judy Grahn,” *Feminist Bookstore News* 13, no. 1 (May/June 1990): 20.

women's literature. During their travels the distribution group met with national figures Robin Morgan and Rita Mae Brown. Grahn and Leonard met up with other west coast GWL activists and attended the Revolutionary People's Coalition Conference, meeting Coletta Reid, who would soon become a member the Furies Collective. Reid was an important conduit for circulating Women's Press Collective materials, even showing up and demanding a stack of *Edward the Dyke* before the production had finished. To consider just a couple of examples of what came of these connections: they eventually drew a number of Bay Area women to Detroit for the Feminist Economic Network experiment (1976) and brought Reid's Diana Press to Oakland (1977) to join with the Women's Press Collective. These relationships were significant threads to the national movement. The energy put into developing and maintaining these relationships was a demonstration of theory in practice as gay women worked to become fully woman-identified. In these friendships we see GWL working to develop lesbian feminism in conjunction with their sisters from around the country.

Successful production of a web of lesbian feminist ties and connections made possible the April 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference (WCLC) that included at least 1,500 women from 202 cities from around the country. The results of the weekend made clear that the formative period of the movement was over and that a new direction was needed. Ideas for WCLC first transpired at a lesbian assembly during the October 1972 meeting of the Southwestern Regional Conference of Gay Organizations. Southern California women agreed to coordinate, but contacts made at the conference gave them statewide resources to draw from. The hope was that the event would bring cohesion among the growing next of woman-identified women. From the beginning their vision included a merging of interests, incorporating the myriad political, social, and cultural activities of lesbian feminism. They recognized that it was

an ambitious plan but they felt it had radical potential. What would happen in bringing together “hundreds of lesbians” was unclear but they felt certain that “*something* big will come out of it.”¹⁴³ Ultimately, a Los Angeles coalition led by women from *The Lesbian Tide* collective spearheaded the event. The West Coast Lesbian Conference (WCLC) demonstrated that the first phase of lesbian feminism was at its end. Attendance figures and a packed program demonstrate its successes. The willingness of so many to travel so far for this event was a clear indication of the existence of a sizeable community with a shared political identity. Women from around the country understood their sexuality as part of a shared woman-loving identity that tied together local activism in the work of building a lesbian movement. Yet the final product was a hotly contested weekend that filled some with hope and others with despair. It exposed participants to the breadth of their interests and the intensity of their disagreements. These realizations pushed lesbian feminism toward a new phase of development. The cacophony of the conference made clear that the movement could not follow a single united trajectory. Yet it also exposed that among woman-identified women there existed the passion and diversity of talents and interests to build Lesbian Nation.

The conference was at once a failure and a triumph; rather than uniting through a cohesive agenda it became clear that lesbian feminists needed space to grow in new directions. Infighting was exhausting for those involved but it also opened a way to envision new possibilities for the movement. Scarcely a single component of the conference evaded critique. Mothers once again found that child care needs went unmet. Those participants hoping to spend time learning from their sisters felt that the weekend was far too structured. Lesbians of color found the program lacking sufficient time to address race in the movement. Political debates led

¹⁴³ Barbara McLean, “Diary of a Mad Organizer,” *The Lesbian Tide* 2, no. 10/11 (May/June 1973): 16.

some to level accusations of socialist infiltration. Grassroots sensibilities led many to critique the headlining of movement “celebrities” Kate Millett and Robin Morgan.¹⁴⁴ Attempts to pass political resolutions resulted in heated debate that resulted in the departure of so many women that quorum could not be maintained for voting to occur. For some the weekend suggested a troublingly depoliticized community. San Francisco activist Louise Merrill evaluated it with a pessimistic eye and called it “the funeral of the gay women’s movement.”¹⁴⁵ Yet others recognized in the cultural offerings a “new pride” that reaffirmed their lesbianism.¹⁴⁶ In spite of the infighting there were those women who found that the conference provided “renewed strength” by demonstrating “we are not alone.”¹⁴⁷ Whether out of rage or joy, participants returned home ready to take action. Their disagreements exposed a movement of diverse interests and conflicting aims. In the coming years they built Lesbian Nation through project activism that allowed individuals and groups to harness specific interests and skills in service of the movement.

¹⁴⁴ Barbara McLean, “Diary of a Mad Organizer,” *The Lesbian Tide* 2, no. 10/11 (May/June 1973): 35-40.

¹⁴⁵ Louise Merrill, “L.A. Revisited 1973,” *Lesbians Speak Out*, 2nd ed. (Oakland: Women’s Press Collective, 1974), 139-140.

¹⁴⁶ Ann Forfreedom, “Lesbos Arise!” *The Lesbian Tide* 2, no. 10/11 (May/June 1973): 4.

¹⁴⁷ Colleen Elegante, “Renewed Strength,” *Off Our Backs* 3, no. 8 (May 1973): 10.

Chapter 3

Women's Bookstores as Lesbian Nation

On A Woman's Place Bookstore:

"As women came together in the growth of the women's movement, as women got interested in mingling with other women, it became clear that there was no place that we could go and not be interfered with by men. A group of us women have gotten together and opened a bookstore....The receiving and transmitting of information, especially the kinds that woman-identified women are looking for, is one of our top priorities. On the other hand, we believe that revolutionary re-forming change comes through person-to-person contact."¹

On Full Moon Coffeehouse and Bookstore:

"Several women in San Francisco began talking about the need for a place where women could get together, in a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere, to share human concerns and to develop and expand their creative talents. They also envisioned a community resource and communications center which could provide women with information about political, educational, and employment related activities."²

On Old Wives Tales Bookstore:

"There was such a hunger for the books that we were inventing the women's movement."³

Feminist bookstores first emerged in the early 1970s, making available to women a new world of public spaces designed specifically to meet their wants and needs. They made visible the existence of and the growing availability of information by, for, and about women. The shelves and shelves of books curated to help women better understand their lives offered a site of

¹ A Woman's Place Untitled Statement, Box 1/2, A Woman's Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

² "The Full Moon Coffeehouse," *Plexus 1*, no. 12 (January 1975): 6 and 12.

³ Carol Seajay, "The Women-In-Print Movement, Some Beginnings: An Interview with Judy Grahn," *Feminist Bookstore News*, Summer Supplement (August 1990): 60-61.

awakening where they could go, browse, and discover content they scarcely knew to ask for. But these spaces were also about so much more than books. Founders envisioned them as vehicles to bring women together and foster solidarity. As the collective of A Woman's Place explained, there were few options for women to join one another without the interference of men. To simply exist freely alongside other women was empowering. Perhaps aside from women's centers no other institution proved so usefully versatile to the movement than bookstores. They were all at once safe havens, information hubs, performance spaces, date destinations, meeting venues, career centers, and feminist classrooms. Bay Area lesbians sat at the center of this activity; lesbian feminist collectives established and operated each of the three bookstores explored here.⁴ They fostered lesbian community and ensured that every single positive text on the lesbian experience would be available to a group of women historically denied any information about themselves. At the same time, they opened their doors to all women in the hopes of expanding their world of woman-identified women. In this way, bookstores could be a vehicle for lesbian separatism, feminist activism, and women's community.

In this chapter I consider three Bay Area women's institutions significant in the mid-seventies: A Woman's Place, Full Moon, and Old Wives Tales.⁵ Lesbians established and ran each as a significant site of feminist activity, and each played a role in fostering the network

⁴ Because my focus is on San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley, I do not take up bookstores in other Bay Area cities. The Oracle in Hayward existed throughout this time as did two in the North Bay, Rising Woman Books and Everywoman's Bookstore. Another, Women's Bookstore, appears to have existed in San Francisco for a period between 1974 and 1975, though I have found very little mention of it. "Resources," *Plexus 1*, no. 3 (April 15-30, 1974): 9; "Women in Business," *Plexus 1*, no. 13 (February 1975): 8; "Women's Bookstores: They are on the rise," *Plexus 3*, no. 10 (December 1976): 13.

⁵ The initial plan for this chapter was a case study of A Woman's Place. It grew out of Gay Women's Liberation and maps roughly onto the chronology of this project. There are few sources available for AWP during the years of Lesbian Nation due, I suspect, to their anti-hierarchical, structureless model of operations. Both the Lesbian Herstory Archives and the GLBT Historical Society hold A Woman's Place collections, but in both cases records begin roughly in 1977. This leaves me with little more in written record than newspaper calendars and announcements. The extant records do allow me to gain some insights into the earlier years, as do interviews with a number of collective members. To enrich this narrative and show fully how women's bookstores were central to lesbian feminism and women's community, I look to the other bookstores in the Bay Area.

building of Lesbian Nation.⁶ A Woman's Place (AWP) was first on the scene and one of the first feminist bookstores in the country. This collective became a model for many others around the country, literally writing the book (or at least pamphlet) on how to open and run a bookstore. Full Moon began as a coffeehouse but quickly added a small bookstore to their offerings. While the literary component was secondary, Full Moon is included here for a couple of reasons. It was consistently included in lists of feminist bookstores and was therefore considered a part of this world, its form and function quite the same as A Woman's Place. The store was located in the Castro, San Francisco's gay district that was dominated by men. Full Moon was thus a unique option for women's participation in this hub of gay community. Old Wives Tales emerged only at the end of this second phase of lesbian feminism. It was a product of the period with its founders training in print culture by working at Full Moon, A Woman's Place, and A Woman's Press Collective. Yet it also speaks to the changes coming at decade's end. Together, the women of these stores gave shape to local feminisms by providing the opportunity to physically be in the movement.

These bookstores demonstrated the desire for and existence of a whole body of literature dedicated to the female experience. Three years after opening, A Woman's Place published a mail order pamphlet and noted its bestselling categories and titles. There was the expected movement literature – histories, critical analyses, anthologies, periodicals, leaflets and such. Movement poets were present too, particularly those with wide following in the Bay Area. Classic novels by Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing stood alongside the contemporary works of Alice Walker and Marge Piercy. Memoirs and biographies similarly reflected this spread,

⁶ As I will discuss in my introduction, regarding geographical boundaries of my work, In this project when I speak of the Bay Area I refer mostly to San Francisco proper and the East Bay cities of Oakland and Berkeley. While the Bay Area includes North and South Bay cities, I find that these communities do not commonly figure into the lives of the women I discuss here.

recounting the lives of Emma Goldman, Simone De Beauvoir, Maya Angelou, and Lorraine Hansberry. Art books and song books celebrated women's creativity, works of psychology assessed women's internal lives, and studies of organic foods and survival reflected the spirit of self-help.⁷ Along with sundry other categories, these books brought in many, many customers.

Such was the interest that the San Francisco Bay Area became home to the highest concentration of women's bookstores in the country. In the summer of 1973 Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie traveled 13,000 miles around the nation to survey the women's movement for their resource guide, *The New Woman's Survival Catalog*. Grimstad wrote ahead about their visits and in doing so they received countless responses that directed them to other places of interest to include on their tour, making the Catalog a remarkably comprehensive "snapshot" of these self-help enterprises at the dawn of Lesbian Nation.⁸ Of the eleven bookstores (two of which were actually mail order services), four were in California: one in San Diego, one in Los Angeles, and two in San Francisco.⁹ Grimstad and Rennie took another snapshot in 1975 and found the number of bookstores had jumped to 38. California was home to a third of them (thirteen). In the Bay Area there was The Oracle (Hayward), A Woman's Place (Oakland), A Woman's Bookshop (Palo Alto), Full Moon (San Francisco), and Women's Bookstore (San Francisco).¹⁰ By the spring of 1977 the "List of Feminist Bookstores and Distributors" included

⁷ Mail Order Packet, Box 1/2, A Woman's Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

⁸ This project was an outgrowth of the work Barnard College asked Grimstad to complete in the years prior, compiling a bibliography of women's studies. She reached out Rennie and the two embarked on a comprehensive survey of the women's movement. "Woman's Building History: Kirsten Grimstad, Susan Rennie (Otis College)," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDQrJOIYJ_4. Accessed 4.17.2016.

⁹ Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie, eds., *The New Woman's Survival Catalog*, (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, Inc., 2973), 21-25.

¹⁰ Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie, eds., *The New Woman's Survival Sourcebook*, 144-145. I chose to focus on A Woman's Place, Full Moon, and (later) Old Wives Tales and not include the others because of the geographic parameters I set for this project. While San Francisco proper and the East Bay had their separate lesbian communities, they appear to have had greater links between them and function in a more collaborative manner than

79 such projects in the United States. Nineteen were in California, nine in the Bay Area. The state with the second highest number of bookstores was New York, matching the Bay Area for a total of nine in the whole state.¹¹ In this way, San Francisco functioned as a unique universe of women in print activity. They made visible to the community that women had things to say, the right to take up public space, and the wish to come together free from men. As Rennie and Grimstad explained, “Feminist bookstores, especially those on the West Coast, convey powerfully the strength and breadth of the Women’s Movement.”¹²

In this chapter I argue that the institution building of Lesbian Nation, viewed here through the women’s bookstore, was a form of feminist politics that rejected engaging with the state as necessary to the work of revolution. After the initial years of shaping the meanings of lesbian feminism, movement women increasingly shifted energy toward activism that paired political organizing with building institutions that served the needs of women’s community. This “project activism” was the work of Lesbian Nation, which reached its height between 1973 and 1977. During this period feminists began to see the powerful ways cultural and service institutions could advance their politics. These new entities provided a level of structure that feminist bodies often struggled without (and struggled against) in the early years of the movement.¹³ Activist and scholar Doborah A. Gerson explains, “By 1972-73 women’s liberation faced a set of internal tensions and began a process of splintering and sectoralization.” The mass and coalitional meetings gave way to “a variety of grassroots projects: women’s health

did Santa Rosa (North Bay) or Hayward (further south on the East Bay). I have omitted Women’s Bookstore because I have found just a couple of mentions of it. It may be that this was a short-lived project.

¹¹ “The List of Feminist Bookstores and Distributors in the U.S. and Canada,” *Feminist Bookstores Newsletter 1*, no. 5 (April 1977): 4-5.

¹² Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie, eds., *The New Woman’s Survival Catalog*, 20.

¹³ This issue was well-captured in Jo Freeman’s “The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” first published in 1971 in the women’s movement publication *Notes From the Third Year*.

collectives, anti-rape groups, women's centers, bookstores, lesbian collectives, [and] childcare collectives."¹⁴ Such ventures made the movement visible, accessible, and applicable to women who had never before engaged in feminism.¹⁵ While women of all sexualities built and participated in this new world of women's institutions, lesbians contributed and benefited in unique ways. Lesbian feminists were more likely to have the freedom to commit themselves full time to project activism and benefited from this work in ways that straight women did not. Because of this, lesbians contributed a disproportionate amount of labor to creating the institutions of women's community. Historians Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor explain that while "feminist counterinstitutions" were not "solely the preserve of lesbians," this project activism was rooted in "interpersonal networks and organizational ties in the lesbian world."¹⁶ Institution building helped to solidify lesbianism as a community and a movement and to make lesbian feminism visible to a rapidly increasing population of woman-identified women looking for places to belong as well as to the women's movement at large.

In the mid-seventies women-loving women took "Lesbian Nation" from theory to practice. Jill Johnston gave name to this core concept of lesbian feminism when she published her book *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* in early 1973. She used her personal narrative of coming to lesbian identity and negotiating between the women's and gay liberation movements to introduce her theoretical contributions. In working through the origin story of her own identity, she considered how the oppression she faced as a woman and as a lesbian could not be

¹⁴ Deborah A. Gerson, "Making Sex Visible: Private Troubles Made Public," in *Ten Years that Shook the City: San Francisco, 1968-1978*, ed. Chris Carlsson, (San Francisco: City Lights Foundation Books, 2011), 178-179.

¹⁵ A. Finn Enke, *Finding the Movement Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, "Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism," *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing Across Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Nancy A. Naples (New York: Routledge, 1998), 62.

separated. As such, “all women are lesbians.”¹⁷ She argued that feminists who maintained sexual relationships with men could, at most, bring about reform. Exploration of the complex relationships not only between straight and gay women but also women who came out during different phases of feminism occupied a good deal of her analysis. She argued that there was “one thing we can be certain of however and that is that women en masse are peers and as such are equals.”¹⁸ They needed to come together for the “present revolutionary project” which was “the creation of a legitimate state defined by women.”¹⁹ Lesbian feminists were “the vanguard of the resistance” as they practiced the “ideal” form of feminism: “identification with other women at multiple levels of the physical intellectual and spiritual.”²⁰ Johnston also believed that “the sexual satisfaction of the woman independently of the man is the sine qua non of the feminist revolution.”²¹ Lesbian feminists did not uniformly adopt each aspect of Johnston’s analysis but the idea of Lesbian Nation functioned as a unifying concept for those women who believed that the path to revolutionary liberation was grounded in women making one another their first and only priority.²²

Lesbian Nation depended upon lesbians recognizing their shared purpose while also, paradoxically, recognizing growing differences within the community. Attendees of the 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference (discussed in the conclusion of chapter 2) traveled home

¹⁷ Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 90.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 277.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 277, 157.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

²² Participants of lesbian feminism certainly spoke excitedly of Johnston and used the term “Lesbian Nation” with some regularity, though not evenly or consistently. I opt to use it here as short hand for the ideas of lesbian feminism that coalesce in these years, especially the belief that the growth of lesbian institutions and visibility was evidence that they were, in fact, building towards revolutionary change.

bemoaning the rifts among lesbians. Yet they returned to their local communities with an understanding of these diverse factions as a movement in its own right, whatever the divides. The conflicts made visible the rich variations of purpose and priority present among their sisters. In the months and years following, lesbian feminists pursued their varied priorities and passions, forming the projects that became Lesbian Nation. A shared sense of women-identification united these women even as the movement moved in many different directions. By the onset of this second phase of the movement a solid body of theory existed, detailing the nature of lesbians' oppression and the potential paths towards liberation. Rapid growth of participation, however, meant greater claims on the movement and its meaning. They thus shifted away from shared ideas and purpose and towards a project focus in which individuals and groups could direct their activist energies towards specific services and arts they felt suited their skills and met movement needs.

Operating from the belief that liberation was rooted in developing "woman supremacy," lesbian feminists understood that they need not engage with the state to bring about revolution. Jill Johnston explained that "banding together as fugitives" allowed for their withdrawal from patriarchal structures and making a "full commitment" to developing the "moral physical spiritual intellectual strengths of women." It was this decision to embrace that which the oppressor declared made them "criminal" or "outcast" that made lesbians "a political group legitimate by its own creation." The more visible lesbian feminists became the more fully they challenged the myriad institutions propping up heterosexuality, gaining greater political power to bring about revolution.²³ In these years lesbian politics often took non-traditional forms with project activism supplanting early political groups. The separatism implicit in Lesbian Nation meant working towards change in ways not always viewed as politically relevant. In the eyes of

²³ Ibid., 275-279.

lesbian feminists, building their community of woman-identified women and constructing social and cultural events and institutions were all politically infused actions that brought them closer and closer to a new kind of society. Establishing strong networks across the country that tied this work together ensured movement toward a unified women's state. Bookstores were among the most productive ventures as they were able to integrate so many varied movement interests into one space. This did not mean an abandonment of the politics or revolutionary spirit of the movement's early years. Rather, it was a period in which they sought the means through which they might create the structures that would allow them to produce new, revolutionary ways of being. Together, they formed the building blocks of Lesbian Nation.

Information Center Incorporate: A Woman's Place Bookstore

A woman's place is in the world. The founding collective of one of the first women's bookstores in the country used its name to announce itself as a new front in the feminist revolution. Information Center Incorporate: A Woman's Place grew out of the constant quest for information in gay and women's liberation, as well as the quest to demonstrate power as public actors. Founders Alice Molloy and Carol Wilson (of *Gay Women's Liberation*, chapter 2) entered lesbian politics through the homophile movement and thus well understood suffocating experience of being denied knowledge about oneself. Through 1971 they formed their bookstore collective via movement relationships, reaching out to women who participated in *Gay Women's Liberation*, *It Ain't Me Babe*, and others. As the store's name indicates, they saw the bookstore as "a Women's Center disguised as a bookstore."²⁴ It was a place for movement lesbians like themselves but it was also a space for women interested in "mingling," hoping to "socialize"

²⁴ Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie, eds., *The New Woman's Survival Catalog*, 23.

with other women away from men.²⁵ The collective reached out to women who shared (or might share) a feminist consciousness while also maintaining the more specific agenda of supporting lesbians through the “transmitting of information...that woman-identified women are looking for.”²⁶ It was archetypal urban lesbian separatism, in which woman-identified women worked within a small lesbian collective to create a space that might bring all women into a women-centered culture. The system worked. AWP brought women together from around the bay and around the country. It became a model for similar projects around the country and served as a beacon to lesbians looking to relocate to friendlier lands. Just a year and a half after its opening A Woman’s Place was celebrated as “the largest, best stocked feminist bookstore in the United States.”²⁷

Before there was A Woman’s Place there was a one-woman Oakland-based distribution service. True to the grassroots nature of the day, Carol Wilson simply loaded her van with feminist print material and traveled about the country to sell them in women’s communities as The Free Woman Distribution Company.²⁸ Upon returning home to the Bay Area she considered how she might expand her goal of circulating movement literature. In February 1971 she and partner Alice Molloy began in earnest to move towards opening a bookstore.²⁹ Molloy became better able to focus on this goal when the feminist paper *It Ain’t Me Babe* came to an end in

²⁵ A Woman’s Place Untitled Statement, Box 1/2, A Woman’s Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

²⁶ A Woman’s Place Untitled Statement, Box 1/2, A Woman’s Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn. This document is written from the perspective of “us women” who “have gotten together and opened a bookstore,” yet includes no names or dates. The context suggests it was written early in its existence, given that it functions as a means of introducing the store to the community.

²⁷ Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie, eds., *The New Woman’s Survival Catalog*, 23.

²⁸ Carol Seajay, “The Women-in-Print Movement, Some Beginnings: An Interview with Judy Grahn,” *Feminist Bookstore News* 13, no. 1 (May/June 1990): 22-23.

²⁹ Chronology of ICI – A Woman’s Place, Binder File 1, A Woman’s Place Bookstore Records, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

April. Molloy and Wilson, along with Wilson's longtime partner Natalie Lando, did a good deal of the preliminary work by locating the building, securing a line of credit, and naming the store. Members of Gay Women's Liberation, the Terrace House, and the Women's Press Collective took part in the planning. Ownership, however, lay in the hands of Molloy and Women's Press founder Wendy Cadden in spite of Cadden never being a formal member of the bookstore collective.³⁰ *Babe* founder Starr Goode joined A Woman's Place and brought with her Rosalie Prosser, a housemate and sometimes labor source for *Babe* mailings. The bookstore collective was rounded out with the addition of Gretchen (Forest) Milne, Marianne Perron, and Nancy Cook. Wilson's singular vision was now entrusted to the stewardship of this carefully formed group of activists.

The collective evolved with time. It is not surprising that Wilson, Molloy, and Lando were a consistent force throughout the store's life given their role in creating it.³¹ Reasons for and processes through which they integrated new members changed over time but they were always mindful of keeping the formal group at a manageable number. Some women came and went as their lives allowed while others had less say about leaving the inner circle. Goode and Prosser, for example, were asked to leave the collective within months for not sharing its values.³² By 1977 four lone founders remained and AWP reached out to the community with an

³⁰ This is an oddity, given that Cadden was never actually formally a part of the collective. It may be that they intended from the beginning to have the press located in the same building. In this way, Molloy and Cadden would have represented the two institutions that would occupy the location.

³¹ They left only once arbitration mandated they do so. This conflict discussed below.

³² The collective found that the two women did not "share our basic feminist affirmation" and "were not able to overcome their need to play the competitive and control games of the larger culture." How to Start a Bookstore, Box 1/2, A Woman's Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn; Bonnie Eisenberg, "It Ain't Me Babe: From Feminist Radicals to Radical Feminists," in *Voices From the Underground: Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, Part 2*, Ken Wachsbarger ed. (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 385-408.

open call for new members.³³ Throughout its fourteen year run at least twenty women belonged to the collective, with a good deal more volunteering their support, labor, and resources to keep AWP afloat.³⁴

The diversity of the collective evolved with time as well. Additions were generally lesbian-identified with the store remembered as “mostly a bunch of dykes.”³⁵ It does not appear that queer identity was a prerequisite for membership though it was accepted as the norm. A March 1979 list of member qualifications included “strong feminist identity (woman identified woman).”³⁶ In April when the bookstore moved forward with filling vacant spots, current members further assessed the qualities they wanted in new members. Meeting notes document conversations in which “we all said we would consider a non-lesbian, with different degrees of reservation.”³⁷ Such a notation suggests that the addition of a “non-lesbian” was not a common practice and was viewed as less than desirable by at least some within the collective.³⁸ By the time A Woman’s Place was embroiled in internal conflict (discussed below) two of the six members identified as straight. This may have been part of an effort to diversify the collective but it was not without controversy. Beyond sexuality, volunteer Carol Seajay experienced the

³³ “Calendar,” *Plexus* 3, no. 11 (January 1977): 9.

³⁴ Chronology of ICI – A Woman’s Place, Binder File 1, A Woman’s Place Bookstore Records, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

³⁵ Kirsten Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 3.

³⁶ Untitled March 1979 List, Box 1/7, A Woman’s Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

³⁷ Meeting Minutes, April 1, 1979, Box 1/7, A Woman’s Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

³⁸ While there were only five members of the collective at this time, two were founders and two had been involved for at least a couple of years, when the collective was much larger, indicating that the majority had experienced the collective membership at its peak, giving them a significant history from which to draw in making this decision.

bookstore as diverse in educational background, age, and class, and included “Asian, Filipina, Black, [and] white” women.³⁹ American Indian member Janice Gould concurred that there was a mix of ages and class backgrounds but she described the collective as mostly white. During her years there (roughly between 1974 and 1978) she recalled just one other woman of color, Japanese American Barbara Noda.⁴⁰ When the collective splintered in 1982 Wilson, Molloy, and Lando, white women all, found themselves in opposition to the more diverse alliance of Darlene Pagano, Jesse Meredith, Elizabeth Summers, and Keiko Kubo who described themselves thusly: “We are four women, one Italian, one Jewish, one Black, one Asian. Two of us are lesbians, two are straight. One of us is 7 ½ months pregnant, one co-parents a 12-year-old. Two of us are working class, two are varying degrees of middle class. We are 28 to 32 years old.”⁴¹ Their personal identities and their political commitment to making the bookstore truly inclusive for all women indicate the potential of such a space. The collective struggled to recognize intersectional goals but it offered a means to discuss and work towards them.

AWP members understood themselves as filling a void in the Bay Area by fashioning a public space catering to the social, cultural, and political needs of the women’s movement. They acknowledged women’s bars as significant in hosting lesbian sociality but also pointed to their limitations and the need for alternatives. Wide variation in lesbian identity and ideology, paired with trepidation among straight women over entering gay spaces made bars unlikely options for widespread feminist belonging. The collective highlighted qualities that made AWP an ideal spot in which to build women’s community. Seating areas “to sit and relax at” supported “rap groups,

³⁹ Kirsten Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*, 3.

⁴⁰ Janice Gould, e-mail message to author, July 30, 2015.

⁴¹ An open letter regarding the lock-out at A Woman’s Place Book Store, September 18, 1982, Informational Fliers, Darlene Pagano Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

poetry readings, movies, etc.” Bulletin boards prominently spanned the walls so that “women can use them to get in touch with other women.” The importance of readily accessible information cannot be overdrawn. The boards lay at women’s fingertips women’s the range of political and cultural activity available to them. They alone were a means of drawing women in. Then, of course, there were the books and assorted print materials like movement journals and newspapers. AWP selected stock in “a discriminating manner” and drafted descriptions for each indicating their strengths and any weaknesses. Passersby, women’s studies students, or questioning lesbians might happen in to locate a specific text only to be exposed to unfamiliar issues and opportunities. In a politically charged statement about the purpose that inspired AWP, the collective expounded, “The male of our species has a history of robbing, killing, cheating, raping, and other acts of aggression coupled with the need to be nurtured preferably 24 hours a day.”⁴² Such critiques graced the walls, peppered book titles, and hung heavy in the air. Once inside many women found themselves empowered by the experience and compelled to return.

The bookstore was a labor of love and faith, driven by purpose rather than profit. Organizers opened it with scarcely enough money to rent the building, obtain licenses, and purchase a few hundred dollars’ worth of books. Eight hundred dollars and one month’s line of credit from a local book distributor and they were off and running. Any money coming in went into building stock which meant a continued reliance upon volunteer labor. It was only in 1974 that anyone received an income and even then it was only three collective members earning a monthly sum of \$50.⁴³ During the height of Lesbian Nation the bookstore generally relied on “anarchist principles of the initiative of each and the dominance of none.” Members contributed

⁴² A Woman’s Place Untitled Statement, Box 1/2, A Woman’s Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

⁴³ How to Start a Bookstore, Box 1/2, A Woman’s Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

what they could and trusted (at least in theory) that others would do the same. This approach meant accepting that things would not always be done or be done well. But this approach was a means of allowing women to contribute what they could while also tending to jobs, families, and so on. They did not divide work by specific chores, choosing instead to let roles develop organically. According to their guide, “We never have given much time to ‘encounter’ or ‘criticism’ sessions among ourselves—we always just assume members will work as much as they can or want to, and not make things difficult for each other.” The primary force holding them together was “basic feminist affirmation” and the energy they found in the activity of running the store.⁴⁴ Archival collections indicate that the shift towards formalizing structures and policies came in 1977. They sought a more stable financial footing and organizational structure, even looking to draft bylaws.⁴⁵ Salary came standard with membership in the collective; a full time schedule of 24 hours per week garnering members \$300 per month.⁴⁶ They also considered the needs of volunteers and when possible welcomed back members or negotiated part time salaries, such as when member Alma Cremonesi requested and was granted part time wages of \$75/month.⁴⁷ Salaries facilitated more inclusive participation across class and background by allowing women to support themselves in this work. But it also complicated faith in the idea that the collective was knit together through a shared purpose and ideology.

⁴⁴ How to Start a Bookstore, Box 1/2, A Woman’s Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn. By accident, the collective created a document meant to support sisters wanted to create their own version of AWP. *The New Woman’s Survival Catalogue*, first published in 1973, mistakenly indicated that the bookstore offered a pamphlet on the subject. This resulted in requests “pouring in for this publication.” The guide included information about starting budget, keeping financial records, inventory and purchasing, advertising, services provided, and the functioning of the operating collective.

⁴⁵ Minutes and Decisions: June 5, 1977, Box 1/4, A Woman’s Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

⁴⁶ Meeting Minutes, June 20, 1977, Box 1/4, A Woman’s Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

⁴⁷ Minutes and Decisions: April 17, 1977, Box 1/4, A Woman’s Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

Significant controversy characterized the latter half of AWP's life. Transition to the new structure lent a degree of stability to daily operations though it did not ease financial concerns. Nor did it ensure interpersonal harmony. Notes indicate that at their October 1977 potluck "all hell broke loose," so much so that at the start of 1978 they were making plans for mediation.⁴⁸ Changes in composition of the collective came with new policies as to pay and overall structure. Existing members questioned the commitment of new additions who joined once positions were paid, speculating that they treating the position more as a job than as a "dream." Others believed that founding members Wilson and Lando functioned as "management" and that their long-term relationship with the store and each other led them to ignore the input of newer members. Members frequently expressed frustration when colleagues failed to recognize their contributions. They accused each other of shirking duties and failing to adequately communicating across shifts.⁴⁹ As they moved toward mediation they considered possible remedies to ease tensions, like introducing structured jobs with specified tasks and creating a more uniform and streamlined pay structure.⁵⁰

By the end of 1979 the collective's internal conflict became more politically charged as they finally began to openly discuss racism within the store and among collective members. About this time the collective tried to streamline operations which meant a smaller number of women and a good amount of time spent together in heavy discussion. As 1980 came to a close founders Wilson and Lando worked alongside Darlene Pagano who joined mid-decade, Jesse

⁴⁸ Untitled document, October 23, 1977, Box 1/4, A Woman's Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn; Meeting Minutes, January 2, 1978, Box 1/6, A Woman's Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

⁴⁹ Mediation II, 2/5/1978, Box 1/5, A Woman's Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

⁵⁰ Regular Bookstore Meeting notes, January 23, 1978, Box 1/6, A Woman's Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn; Bookstore Meeting Notes, February 26, 1978, Box 1/6, Box 1/6, A Woman's Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

Meredith who joined in 1979, and recent additions Keiko Kubo and Elizabeth Summers. Guidelines for adding new members did not specifically prioritize women of color as other collectives did but the final two additions were women of color. Records indicate that these women did not shy away from addressing issues of racism within the collective. Meredith and Pagano (who identified as a white middle class Jewish lesbian and an Italian working class celibate, respectively) learned to listen and become allies, building an awareness of intersectionality by working alongside Kubo and Summers. As allies they called out the bookstore's failure to move quickly enough in offering services and resources for women of color. They identified specific means of supporting their sisters by educating themselves, attending events by and for women of color, and demonstrating support for Kubo and Summers when they spoke to race.

On a morning in September 1982 Pagano arrived to work only to find the locks changed and a notice announcing that A Woman's Place was closed temporarily while the collective restructured. With this act Wilson and Molloy repositioned themselves as the rightful owners and operators of the bookstore.⁵¹ Molloy had not formally been a collective member since mid-1977 but her name remained on all legal documents as the store's owner. Molloy and Wilson further defended their hostile act by citing the poor functioning of the collective which amounted to "emotional battery."⁵² The locked out women agreed that there was internal strife. They argued, however, that ideological differences were the most significant area of contention. In their view, Wilson and Lando opposed their "commitment to multi-issue, coalition feminism" and resisted

⁵¹ The initial notice of termination apparently included Lando alongside the other four, but within a week's time it was clear that she would maintain ties with Wilson and Molloy. Given her long history with these two it is not surprising that Lando mended ties with Wilson and Molloy. Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*, 98.

⁵² An open letter regarding the lock-out at A Woman's Place Book Store, September 18, 1982, Informational Fliers, Darlene Pagano Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

efforts to address “all oppression within our ranks.”⁵³ The quartet further cited growing generational schisms. The conflict was a painful one for the community and resolved only through formal arbitration after the locked out women filed suit. In 1983, Pagano, Meredith, Kubo, and Summers were granted control over A Woman’s Place, which was to be incorporated as a non-profit. Their leadership was to be temporary. Lando, Wilson, and Molloy were required to sever all ties with the store.⁵⁴ Ultimately, their vision would not be long lived and the bookstore closed just a couple of years later.

Responses to the conflict demonstrate all that A Woman’s Place came to mean to Bay Area feminism. Women struggled with the infighting that arose at end of decade and pleaded for resolution. In 1982 Women’s Press Collective Martha Shelley responded to the lockout and ensuing struggle: “The bookstore is a community center. It is the hub of the women’s community in the East Bay and one of the few surviving institutions we have. Right now the internal conflict is dividing our community rather than strengthening and uniting it.”⁵⁵ It is unclear along which lines women splintered as a result of this conflict but both sides received support. During mediation the bookstore stayed open under Wilson, Molloy, and Lando, indicating clientele willing to support the store under their leadership. But the women’s community also rallied around the locked out four with regular meetings and fundraisers designed to keep information circulating and funds coming in.⁵⁶ The bookstore survived (if only for a time) but it was not the

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “Bookstore Women Start New Page,” *Plexus 10*, no. 5 (July 1983): 1.

⁵⁵ Martha Shelley letter, Box 2, Letters of Support/Criticism/Celebration, 9-10, 1982, Darlene Pagano Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁵⁶ Regarding the divides in community, it does appear that factions took shape in ways that reflected the issues that had been plaguing the collective. One fundraiser was hosted at La Pena Cultural Center with performances by a Jewish feminist theater troupe. Another featured the Alberta Jackson Band that included women

only entity in flux by this point. The nature of the community was changing as well. The closure, however, did not detract from all that AWP meant to the women who made it their home for over a decade. Even after it closed it served as a testament to all that lesbian feminists were able to achieve: “A Woman’s Place is the end result of thousands of women giving to it their time, energy, money, ideas, skills, and consistent matronage. No one can claim that she is the one (or two or three) who built or embodies A Woman’s Place.”⁵⁷ Its legacy lived on in many ways, including the many stores that rose up in its image.

Full Moon Coffeehouse and Bookstore

Rather than be one of the many “bookstores that sell coffee” when Full Moon opened in 1974, the community celebrated it as a “coffeehouse that sells books!” The novelty with which it was described in the 1975 *New Women’s Survival Sourcebook* indicates that Full Moon was something of a new concept and one of the nation’s first women’s coffeehouses.⁵⁸ The bookstore was a bit of an afterthought, though a significant one given that it was the only of its kind in San Francisco proper until Old Wives Tails opened in late 1976. It broke new ground in a number of ways. It was “the first explicitly women-only establishment” in the gay (male-dominated) Castro District and in the entire city of San Francisco.⁵⁹ As with the A Woman’s Place, this was a woman-identified project; the majority of workers who kept it running were lesbians. Founders

of color. Assorted fliers, Fliers for Benefits, Box 2, Darlene Pagano Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁵⁷ Untitled Statement, Community Meeting, December, Box 2, Darlene Pagano Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁵⁸ Rennie and Grimstad, eds., *The New Women’s Survival Sourcebook*, 144. In this second edition of their guide to the women’s community, Rennie and Grimstad included Full Moon in their section on bookstores. The guide did not include a section on women’s cafes, coffeehouses, and restaurants, indicating that these had not yet become a common phenomenon at this time.

⁵⁹ Donna J. Gravies and Shayne E. Watson, *Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ History in San Francisco*, Prepared for the City and County of San Francisco October 2015, 171.

hoped first and foremost to create “a place where women could get together.” It succeeded in becoming such a space, functioning as a go-to site for finding community and enjoying women’s culture. It also became “a community resource and communications center which would provide women with information about political, education, and employment related activities.”⁶⁰ The women who joined Full Moon’s volunteer collective, as well as the café’s patrons, laid claim to the space as theirs and asserted a right to shape its meaning and purpose, pushing it towards greater political utility. In this way, Full Moon serves as an example of the spirit of Lesbian Nation in which participants believed such projects should openly collaborate with and be fully accountable to the communities they served. Only by doing so could they be tools for revolution.

The formation and growth of Full Moon speaks to the interconnectedness of Bay Area lesbians and their centrality to maintaining the women’s movement in these years. It began as a conversation in a women’s studies course at San Francisco State in 1973. Four faculty members, Gretchen Milne (a founding member of A Woman’s Place), Sally Gearhart (the first out lesbian to obtain a tenure track position), Jane Gurko (partner to Gearhart, with whom she built a separatist collective in Northern California) and Nancy McDermott (a lesbian-identified professor who helped Gearhart get hired) offered four courses bundled as a group and titled “The Block.”⁶¹ Five students used their time in The Block to talk through their desire for a place in the city where women could gather. cursory steps included visiting and studying local cafes. Identified as “middle class lesbian-feminists,” they drew upon their own resources as well as

⁶⁰ “The Full Moon Coffee House,” *Plexus 1*, no. 12 (January, 1975): 6.

⁶¹ Sally Gearhart, Interview with the author, June 9, 2013. Barbara J. Love, *Feminists Who Changed America*, 192; Junko R. Onosaka, *Feminist Revolution in Literacy*, 59-60; “The Full Moon Coffee House,” *Plexus 1*, no. 12 (January, 1975): 6.

borrowing from friends and family to secure a building.⁶² In taking these first steps they took on the financial and legal responsibilities necessary to start a business.⁶³ The five founders recruited volunteers from throughout the women's community to transform the "crowded and crumbling hulk" of a building located in the Castro district.⁶⁴ Fliers placed around the city did the job. Carol Seajay donated labor after stumbling across one in the stall of a women's restroom shortly after arriving in San Francisco.⁶⁵ Each bit of labor was completed by women looking to support their movement, "from repainting the black walls to the basic plumbing, electrical work and carpentry."⁶⁶ Rented in January 1974, the women readied the building for a March 7th opening to honor International Women's Day.

Day to day operations lay primarily with the volunteers who came to be known as "the large collective." Free labor as a form of activism was common across the movement though specific arrangements varied from project to project. The small collective explained that volunteering at Full Moon allowed women to have the satisfying experience of "donating energy to the women's community." Volunteers would be eligible for "profit-sharing" and "greater sharing of all responsibilities" as the coffeehouse grew.⁶⁷ Large Collective members staffed the

⁶² While Deborah Wolf identified them as lesbian feminists all, Janja Lalich recalls that there was one straight woman among them, and believed she may have been the one with a good deal of the funds to set the project in motion. I have yet to locate the identities of these founders with the exception of Nancy Stern, who spoke to the women's press about their work. The two members of the collective that I spoke with did not recall who they were. Per the Plexus article that discussed its opening and offerings, I believe that one of the founders was Nancy Stern. Janja Lalich, interview with the author, July 31, 2015; Deborah Goleman Wolf, *The Lesbian Community, with an Afterword, 1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 107.

⁶³ "The Full Moon Coffee House," *Plexus 1*, no. 12 (January, 1975): 6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Carol Seajay, "Some Beginnings: An Interview with Judy Grahn, Part Two," *Feminist Bookstore News*, Summer Supplement (August 1990): 55-56.

⁶⁶ "The Full Moon Coffee House," *Plexus 1*, no. 12 (January, 1975): 6.

⁶⁷ Free Box: Ten Women Leave Full Moon and Tell Why, Box 1/1, Sharon Crase – San Francisco Daughters of Bilitis Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

majority of work shifts, responsible for the day to day tasks of seeing to the patrons. From the beginning individuals from this body staffed 75% of the 38 shifts, with that percentage increasing throughout the first year.⁶⁸ They prepared food, shelved books, cleaned, and served as information specialists. The Small Collective continued to handle financial and all other major decisions in closed meetings. For a time this system worked and it joined the likes of Bacchanal (a woman's bar) and the Berkeley Women's Center as the most active sites of feminist programming in the Bay Area.

Full Moon was as much a resource center as it was café. Near the entrance one could find what they called a "free box" to help one another meet basic material needs; women could leave and take clothing as they needed it.⁶⁹ The sense of community was clear, with regular patrons understanding their responsibility to one another and women across the Bay Area. Bulletin boards and a materials table fostered personal and political outreach. The importance of these posting spaces cannot be overestimated. Through these boards women could conspire to develop new projects, recruit attendees for dances or fundraisers, locate a place to stay or a new roommate, and call for participation in the newest political cause. Affiliation with Full Moon helped establish one's legitimacy among feminist sisters. In 1974 a pair of women advertised in San Francisco's DOB publication *Sisters* that they hoped to explore the implications for lesbians of having been "orphaned." In addition to their own contact details, they listed Full Moon as another option through which to contact them.⁷⁰ By doing so they made their group accessible and situated it in relation to a known entity. Then, of course, were the actual services Full Moon was designed to offer. Coffee and light meals were available Tuesday through Friday from 4

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Deborah Wolf, *The Lesbian Community*, 113.

⁷⁰ "Local Lesbian News," *Sisters* 5, no. 9 (September 1974): 28.

p.m. to 11 p.m., Saturday and Sunday from noon to midnight. And the books, while fewer in number than at A Woman's Place, were comparable. A small room lined with shelves made available "literature by women, as well as periodicals, newspapers, and other information about the Women's Movement." The Small Collective may have been more business orientated than their sisters across the bay but Full Moon was no less a resource center than AWP.

It offered a bit something for everyone but became "known best for its fine entertainment."⁷¹ "Exciting programs in music, poetry, and theater, feminist lecturers and films" made it what Sociologist Deborah Goleman Wolf described as "a total feminist cultural haven."⁷² The amount of programming Full Moon offered indicates the demand for such events. *Plexus*, the Bay Area women's paper, published an extensive monthly calendar alerting the women's community to the breadth of Full Moon's offerings. Within the first couple of months the coffeehouse began to host performances and meetings. In May 1974 such events came in the form of a concert by guitarist Joan Becker and a rape crisis meeting.⁷³ By August they held weekly events and workshops and hosted some of the movement's most well-known performers. Tuesdays featured women's poetry and Sunday afternoons hosted a writing workshop. Olivia artist Cris Williamson (chapter 4) performed two shows a night to meet demand, demonstrating the rocketing popularity of women's music and Full Moon's success in building an audience in less than six months.⁷⁴ The wide array of events on the calendar by the start of the 1975 indicates a commitment to meeting the diverse interests of the community. Its thirteen scheduled events in

⁷¹ "The Full Moon Coffee House," *Plexus 1*, no. 12 (January, 1975): 12.

⁷² "The Full Moon Coffee House," *Plexus 1*, no. 12 (January, 1975): 6.

⁷² "The Full Moon Coffee House," *Plexus 1*, no. 12 (January, 1975): 6; Deborah Wolf, *The Lesbian Community*, 108.

⁷³ "Calendar," *Plexus 1*, no. 4 (May 1-15, 1974): 6.

⁷⁴ "August," *Plexus 1*, no. 7 (August 1974): 9.

January included poets and open poetry readings, classical piano, blues and improvisational jazz, and a film screening.⁷⁵ Ten to twenty events per month provided ample opportunity for women to make the bookstore a central component of their public lives.

Full Moon quickly became the go to spot for lesbians in the city. This was particularly true for those who were looking for social spaces other than women's bars. As one lesbian musician recalls, "For this lesbian outsider, the only contact with lesbians (outside the thriving bar scenes) in San Francisco was either at The Full Moon Coffeehouse or The Women's Bookstore." When Susan Abbott moved to the city in 1976 she "went to Full Moon Coffeehouse right off the bat."⁷⁶ In this space they were free to be themselves. Large Collective member Ellen Ullman went every day after work, regardless of whether she had a shift. She recalls the strength of the friendships she built there, detailing fondly how "it was a very comfortable space" where they "just made friendships that were truthful...an army of lovers."⁷⁷ Another member explained that the store's opening was a "spectacular" occasion because up until that point "there were only bars for lesbians to go to." To her mind, "anybody who was anybody knew that the Full Moon opened."⁷⁸ For women working out their sexual identities the space represented possibility. It was a site of education and immersion in lesbian culture. One woman recalls being surrounded by lesbians listening to Judy Grahn read, which "sent chills through my body, drawing me into the possibilities."⁷⁹ It was a beacon of lesbian belonging in the city.

⁷⁵ "Calendar," *Plexus 1*, no. 12 (January 1975): 9.

⁷⁶ Joey Brite comment (July 11, 2011) on "A Simple Revolution: A community dialogue with Judy Grahn" on Aunt Lute website, <http://auntlute.com/1948/a-simple-revolution/blog/>. Accessed 5/15/16.

⁷⁷ Ellen Ullman, interview with the author, August 26, 2015.

⁷⁸ Janja Lalich, interview with the author, July 31, 2015.

The more the Large Collective integrated political analysis into their participation the more they came into conflict with the owners. Volunteers wanted to have a say in making the coffeehouse run better. But they also wanted it to be politically grounded and in keeping with the egalitarian ethos of the movement. Just months after opening individuals from the Large Collective approached the owners to discuss changing the decision making process. Others began to reach out and offer to take on more responsibility with book buying or programming. They also began collecting the concerns of patrons “about the quality of the food, the quality and amount of entertainment, aesthetics and maintenance of the place, disorganization of the bookstore, and lack of political consciousness.”⁸⁰ At the end of Full Moon’s first year a handful of Large Collective members decided that they could no longer work without a “structure” and a “philosophy.” They called a meeting with all bookstore workers in February 1975 to discuss priority concerns, including sharing the power of decision making and determining a structure by which “personal and political differences were not ignored but confronted.” To their mind, the lack of structure prevented Full Moon from running well given that those who made the major decisions had the least contact with patrons. In this environment, even deciding the type of sandwiches they would sell seemed a hard fought for opportunity. Rather than see their work as “donating energy to the women’s community directly” they worried that they were free labor for a private business. This concern was exacerbated when they discovered that members of the small collective received wages while continuing to rely upon volunteer labor and requesting donations from the community in order to stay open. A number of Large Collective women

⁷⁹ Wendy Judith Cutler, “Radical Lesbian Feminism in Practice: ICI A Woman’s Place Bookstore,” on Trivia: Voices of Women website, <http://www.triviavoices.com/radical-lesbian-feminism-in-practice.html#.Vze16vkrLIW>, Accessed 5.15.2016.

⁸⁰ Free Box: Ten Women Leave Full Moon and Tell Why, Box 1/1, Sharon Crase – San Francisco Daughters of Bilitis Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

found solidarity in the discussion and about half of this volunteer body joined together to demand change. Four of the five members of the Small Collective resisted conversations about substantive modifications to the existing structure and the women decided to call in a mediator.⁸¹

The Small Collective felt attacked, saying that “dissatisfaction” expressed by the volunteers came in the form of demands that made them (the founders) feel defensive. In behaving this way the volunteers produced “tension and hostility which was a determining factor affecting both the process and the outcome.” Mediated conversations produced a number of possible resolutions but there was little consistency in these options from one meeting to the next. Owners argued that they were willing to open the managing body to more women but did not know how to adjust their legal and financial responsibilities. Their distrust of certain volunteers proved a further barrier to relinquishing any measure of responsibility. Through a month of mediation they determined that the only way to produce radical change in the operation of Full Moon was for the owners to sell it to the Large Collective. No explanation for why this did not happen is provided other than to say that “because of the complexities in this change of authority...this solution would not be viable.”⁸² The volunteers saw this as an insulting change of position and grew increasingly frustrated. While they acknowledged that they were all inexperienced and the owners ended up with power rather unwittingly, they resented what they saw as a refusal to relinquish any authority. About half of the Large Collective believed they offered every possible form of resolution. Ultimately, the Small Collective wanted to continue to determine who they worked with and how they did so, withdrawing the offer to run Full Moon collectively. Half of the large collective walked out.

⁸¹ Free Box: Ten Women Leave Full Moon and Tell Why, Box 1/1, Sharon Crase – San Francisco Daughters of Bilitis Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

⁸² Susan Nolan, “Crisis at the Full Moon,” *Plexus* 2, no. 4 (June 1975): 4.

The women who left became the Free Box collective and expressed their beliefs that an institution serving and being supported by the women's movement ought to be run per the principles of that community. The individuals likely to volunteer at the coffeehouse were those who held activist tendencies – who were motivated to be of services to their sisters. It is of little surprise, then, that they demanded greater political accountability from the owners. Why should the women contributing the majority of the labor be excluded from being anything more than drudges? Free Box women saw it as a clear class issue, providing a source of free labor. Lulich explains that “it wasn't like we wanted pay or things like that – we just wanted to have more say.” Ellen Ullman recalls that class politics heavily inflected the mediations with accusations of bourgeois behaviors, anathema to feminist legitimacy. Both women agreed that the Free Box women were much more politically inclined. Janja Lulich dated one of the owners for a time during this conflict and their relationship suffered for the disagreements between the collectives. Lulich explained that Raelynn “didn't have a political bone in her body” and as such failed to understand why the changes they sought meant so much to the volunteers. As with the skirmish at A Woman's Place, Bay Area women closely watched the developments of this conflict and saw themselves as a part of it. Anyone entering or passing by the café during the height of conflict could not ignore it; Free Box women distributed their pamphlet “Ten Women Leave Full Moon and Tell Why” at the entry during business hours. *Plexus* printed the positions of both factions in articles and letters to the editor. The clash even wound up in national lesbian press. Upon visiting the city New York lesbian feminists found that “debate is raging” over the Full Moon controversy, where “a large part of the collective have quit for political reasons.” While events such as Alix Dobkin's visit continued to pack the venue, “many women still won't come because of the controversy.”⁸³ This circulation of information ensured that women throughout

⁸³ Liza Cowan and Penny House, “California Diary,” *Dyke: A Quarterly 1*, no. 1 (Winter 1975-1976): 73.

Lesbian Nation had the opportunity to weigh in and debate the values of the movement as contested in this rupture.

Full Moon remained in the hands of the owners for a time but it did move toward the changes so heatedly debated during mediation. The women of the Free Box Collective never returned to work. Their pamphlet detailed the history of the coffeehouse as well as the rising conflicts and attempts at resolution. It appears that this conflict and the response of the Free Box did impede the day to day functioning of Full Moon for a time. In the initial year it hosted 12-20 scheduled events a month yet in May 1975 (during the peak of the conflict) the *Plexus* calendar listed only one. June included just a handful. It took months to pick back up to previous numbers. Yet the issues raised by the Free Box members were addressed; in their pamphlet they posed three major questions for the women who remained. How would the small collective exercise its power and differentiate the roles between owner and volunteer? Would they continue to draw upon community support without disclosing how such resources were utilized? And would they actually commit to taking political positions? In July, just a few months after the walkout, *Plexus* reported a changed Full Moon. A member explained, “Most of us feel pretty bad about the past.” They added weekly meetings that included all women (rather than by Small and Large Collective) and committees “to focus on food, maintenance, and other aspects.” New members joined in these months for fear that the departure of the Free Box women would force the café to close. The women *Plexus* interviewed were celebratory and touted the support they now experienced among the collective members. They discovered that “trust is radical” and that “sisterhood is a lot of work.”⁸⁴ Upon announcing its closure in early 1978 the “Full Moon

⁸⁴ Susan Nolan, “Radical Trust at the Full Moon,” *Plexus* 2, no. 5 (July 1975): 5.

Collective” described itself as “a worker-owned consensus collective.”⁸⁵ Likely, the questions raised by the Full Box informed conversation among the remaining workers and with patrons, making it difficult to continue without change.

The significant role played by Full Moon in the women’s community ensured that volunteers and participants felt invested in making the space reflective of movement values. These values in turn empowered them to claim it as belonging to the movement and to assert the right to have a voice in shaping its purpose. They saw this space as theirs and wanted it to reflect their feminism and better foster their political visions. The Free Box protests and community engagement ensured that the Small Collective could not avoid engaging with the critiques and moving closer to the vision patrons held. Doors remained open for about three years after the 1975 conflict during which time it continued to foster vibrant opportunities for social and political engagement. Increasingly, the coffeehouse collective became an integral part of a political coalition looking to expand feminist activity in the Bay Area. A number of members joined with the San Francisco Women’s Centers to open a women’s building in the city with the hopes of eventually reopening in such a space. While this never came to pass, the structure and priorities of the collective at its end indicated that activists pulled the coffeehouse more fully into the women’s movement.

Old Wives Tales

Old Wives Tales opened in San Francisco in 1976 just at the end of this second phase of lesbian feminism. In many ways it better reflects the trends of the third period of the movement (discussed in chapter 4) but it warrants some attention here for a number of reasons. Founder Carol Seajay volunteered at both A Woman’s Place and Full Moon and found in these

⁸⁵ The Full Moon Collective, “Full Moon Wanes,” *Plexus* 5, no. 2 (April 1978): 16.

experiences the inspiration to open her own bookstore. It long outlasted its sisters, serving the Bay Area women's community until 1995. Old Wives Tales was well situated in the Mission District on Valencia Street, the Mission becoming the heart of lesbian San Francisco and home to the Women's Building (opened in 1979 and still standing today). Seajay and her store became central to the women in print movement by publishing the Feminist Bookstore News for nearly 25 years. This publication united bookstores around the country and made them part of a world accountable to one another. Old Wives Tales was a product of Lesbian Nation thus further shedding light on lesbian feminism at mid-decade. It also offers insight into the negotiations of lesbian feminism as the 1970s faded into the 1980s.

The appeal of west coast print activity was a pull Carol Seajay could not ignore. While active in women's liberation in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Seajay "'met'" Bay Area women through the page. Thanks to Carol Wilson's distribution activity Seajay purchased a copy of the Women's Press Collective's *Woman to Woman* in her home state. The national reach of women's periodicals introduced her to Judy Grahn's *The Psychoanalysis of Edward the Dyke* which she recalled as "the most amazing thing I had ever read."⁸⁶ This same press alerted her to the 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference. Seeing hundreds of women in a room together as well as the offerings on display from the Women's Press Collective convinced Seajay that California was the place to be.⁸⁷ She understood these positive depictions of women and their love for each other to be a revolutionary act and wanted to take part in such work.⁸⁸ By the fall of 1973 she

⁸⁶ Carol Seajay, "The Women-In-Print Movement, Some Beginnings: An Interview with Judy Grahn, Part 1," *Feminist Bookstore News* 13, no. 1 (May/June 1990): 19.

⁸⁷ Carol Seajay, "The Women-In-Print Movement, Some Beginnings: An Interview with Judy Grahn, Part 2," *Feminist Bookstore News*, Summer Supplement (August 1990): 55; Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*, 1-2.

⁸⁸ Carol Seajay, "The Women-In-Print Movement, Some Beginnings: An Interview with Judy Grahn, Part One," *Feminist Bookstore News* 13, no 1 (May/June 1990), 19-20.

started travelling west on her motorcycle, books strapped to the back, arriving in San Francisco in early 1974.

Once in the city she threw herself into lesbian feminist activity and the growing world of women in print.⁸⁹ Friend Gretchen “Forrest” Milne welcomed her to the area and helped her get involved. Milne was a member of the founding collective of A Woman’s Place and thus intimately familiar with Bay Area lesbian feminism. As mentioned above, Seajay helped ready the Full Moon for its grand opening. Soon after this she immersed herself in East Bay activity by volunteering at A Woman’s Place, which “was a thriving, successful bookstore with all kinds of things going on and there was this printing press...right next door.”⁹⁰ It was here that she met Paula Wallace who was working with the Women’s Press Collective. The two became lovers and eventually partners in opening their own bookstore. Seajay’s involvement in these predecessors allowed her to assess local feminist activity and led her to believe that the San Francisco women’s community had the capacity to support another bookstore. Full Moon’s offerings were relatively small and travel to North Bay or East Bay could be prohibitive. She realized, “if I was willing to travel this huge distance and spend 3 hours a day getting there and back to work for free to make this bookstore happen” then other women were likely “in the same straits.”⁹¹ By the time Seajay attended the 1976 Women in Print (WIP) conference as a representative of AWP she had already applied for a loan from the local Feminist Federal Credit Union in the hopes of

⁸⁹ This world of activity is sometimes referred to as the Women in Print Movement. It was a network of “allied practitioners” who produced “an alternative communications circuit” composed of “readers and writers, editors, printers, publishers, distributors, and retailers.” They were united around the goals of “capturing women’s experiences” in order to “change the dominant world.” Trysh Travis, “The Women in Print Movement: History and Implications,” *Book History 11* (2008): 276.

⁹⁰ Carol Seajay, “Some Beginnings: An Interview with Judy Grahn, Part Two,” *Feminist Bookstore News*, Summer Supplement (August 1990): 55-56.

⁹¹ Carol Seajay, “Some Beginnings: An Interview with Judy Grahn, Part Two,” *Feminist Bookstore News*, Summer Supplement (August 1990): 59.

opening a bookstore. Once at the gathering she received support other bookwomen who assured her that she had the necessary resources to begin.

Bay Area lesbian feminism made Old Wives Tales possible. AWP provided the blueprint used by so many in this era. Judy Grahn described “the Northern California working class method” of project activism in which activists “*declare* a bookstore, and then, little by little, build the stock.” Beginning with \$6,000 seemed easy compared to AWP’s budget of less than a thousand dollars. The Feminist Federal Credit Union loan committee included a published feminist poet and a bookwoman from Hayward’s women’s bookstore The Oracle. They women believed that the city could support another bookstore. Seajay and Wallace also had a friend, “a dyke who managed a PG&E substation and had a ‘good’ income” who agreed to cosign.⁹² While at WIP Seajay got word that they received the loan for the store and also agreed to begin the *Feminist Bookstore Newsletter* dreamt up by participants as a way to maintain the network formalized at the conference. Andre of Santa Rosa’s Rising Woman Books agreed to work with her on the project.⁹³ As Seajay and Wallace struggled to navigate their relationship and the bookstore in the beginning, they received support from sister bookwomen and the *Feminist Bookstore Newsletter* network.

Old Wives Tales opened the last day of October 1976 as a bookstore and women’s “communication center.”⁹⁴ It began somewhat differently from A Woman’s Place and Full Moon in that it Seajay and Wallace opened it as co-owners rather than as part of a larger collective. Seajay’s motivations were complex. Collectives tended to open bookstores with political

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Carol Seajay, “Some Beginnings: An Interview with Judy Grahn, Part Two,” *Feminist Bookstore News*, Summer Supplement (August 1990): 59-70.

⁹⁴ “Women’s Bookstores: They are on the Rise,” *Plexus* 3, no. 10 (December 1976), 13.

motivations and perhaps a hope that they would eventually provide wages for self-support. Seajay understood the feminist potential of such a project, but she also saw a bookstore as a solution to the upcoming end in unemployment payments and a way to break free from homophobic workplaces. In a workplace of her own making she could live her lesbian feminism in each part of her day.⁹⁵ Over time she and Wallace expanded into a collective and navigated the joys and difficulties that such a process included. As the collective grew it maintained its lesbian feminist identity but worked to be more representative of the community it served. In 1980 when ready to hire they prioritized third world and disabled women.⁹⁶ In late 1981 when the five member collective attended the second Women in Print Conference it was in a position to boast about its composition: ““We now range in age from 19 to 46, come from four different racial and cultural backgrounds; we include a broad class spectrum, are born on three different continents, and speak five languages.””⁹⁷

Seajay and company took seriously the work of serving the Bay Area’s diverse women’s community. They chose a storefront on Valencia “because they wanted it located in an area ‘accessible to women of color, to women traveling by public transit, and to Dykes and feminists.””⁹⁸ Diversity in programming reflected a wide range of feminist interests. In her study of women’s bookstores Junko R. Onosaka tallied nearly 150 events from the store’s opening through 1979, including “58 writers, 20 artists, 21 poets, 51 political activists and others.”⁹⁹ The first year included the following events: crafts fairs, Willyce Kim poetry readings,

⁹⁵ Ibid., 31-32.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 64.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*, 87.

⁹⁸ Donna J. Graves and Shayne E. Watson, *Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ History in San Francisco*, 174. http://www.sf-planning.org/ftp/files/Preservation/lgbt_HCS/LGBTQ_HCS_October2015.pdf

⁹⁹ Junko R. Onosaka, *Feminist Revolution in Literacy*, 121.

Younger/Older Lesbians meetings, a Chicana History slideshow, a Women in Distribution workshop, and a Lesbian Schoolworkers presentation.¹⁰⁰ The store was particularly important to young queer women who often had nowhere else to go, especially as Valencia became known as a hub of lesbian activity. Old Wives Tales was a safe space where they envisioned a future living openly. Marial Dreamwalker was a teenager at mid-decade and “hung out at Old Wives Tales bookstore with older dykes. I love to be around the energy and sit on the floor for hours reading and dreaming about someday being with a woman. As a young Latina woman in those days, this was not an option.”¹⁰¹ Another young woman, Kit Quan, happened to befriend Seajay’s foster daughter and found out about Old Wives Tales from her. Working to escape a violent home life, she went to Seajay and Wallace to inquire about a job. They hired her instantly. The bookstore quite literally became a home to a young lesbian who often had nowhere to go.¹⁰² Figuratively it became home to many, many more.

Seajay’s work as a bookwoman well qualified her to produce the *Feminist Bookstore Newsletter (FBN)*. By the time she opened her own store she had amassed several years of experience in the print world. She also lived in what was the epicenter of the women in print movement given that the city housed the highest number of women’s bookstores and presses anywhere in the nation. Participants in the first WIP conference worried about how they could carry on the conversations and connections forged in that Nebraska campground where they met. They settled upon a newsletter through which they could “talk about new books and new ways of running bookstores, and teach each other new skills.” Throughout the course of the conference

¹⁰⁰ From *Plexus* Calendars: December 1976, January, March, June, and October 1977.

¹⁰¹ Marial Dreamwalker comment to “A Simple Revolution: A Community Dialogue with Judy Grahn,” Aunt Lute website, <http://auntlute.com/1948/a-simple-revolution/blog/>, Accessed 5.30.2016.

¹⁰² Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*, 45.

Seajay decided she would move forward with her bookstore and decided to take on the newsletter as well. Other bookwomen were hesitant to take on the project but Seajay had newsletter experience from her days in Michigan's lesbian feminist movement. It would bring in a bit of extra money while getting Old Wives Tales up and running as participating bookstores planned to contribute funds towards its production. A member of a North Bay bookstore agreed to help.¹⁰³ The first issue was dated just two weeks prior to the opening of Old Wives Tales. Seajay had taken on an ambitious workload but *FBN* was a significant tool for her in figuring out how to run her own store.

The role of Carol Seajay and Bay Area bookwomen in making *Feminist Bookstore Newsletter* a reality spoke to the woman-identified nature of the women in print movement. Women's bookstores flourished but the initial guide published by A Woman's Place was not enough to sustain them. *FBN* raised awareness as to the existence of bookstores, presses, distributors, and publications around the country and provided a vehicle through which bookwomen supported one another by sharing ideas, strategies, and practical tips to keep doors open and women coming back. Most consistently, they used the pages of their newsletter to talk books and booklists. Even AWP, with its years of experience, struggled to establish efficient and streamlined ways of finding books and determining which ones were proper additions to a feminist bookstore. They found out about titles through customer request, subscription to Publishers Weekly, and membership in American Booksellers Association. Yet the latter two options were not reliable in helping collectives determine which books to carry. Of particular interest was building lesbian stock. Seajay described trying to figure this out: "What was pro-woman? What was a lesbian book? Was it lesbian if the word lesbian was mentioned in it even

¹⁰³ Carol Seajay, "Some Beginnings: An Interview with Judy Grahn, Part Two," *Feminist Bookstore News*, Summer Supplement (August 1990): 60-61.

though she died horribly as the moral of the story? Is that a lesbian book? Or is it a lesbian book only if it's written by a lesbian? ... Or if it didn't say 'lesbian' anywhere, but it was about women loving each other in some way?"¹⁰⁴ The second issue of *FBN* included a list of lesbian books compiled by Full Moon's Lyndall Cowan. She explained that "since there is endless controversy over what is a lesbian book and what is not, included here is every title in print that is known to me."¹⁰⁵ In the coming issues other subscribers added to the list. The interest in lesbian stock indicates the just how women-centered the bookstores were and how important they continued to be in fostering Lesbian Nation.

Bookstores as Lesbian Nation

In bookstores, free to flirt, to listen to a woman sing about loving women, to sit in a space with lesbian books and posters and announcements lining the walls, and to do all of this in a public place – this was revolutionary. This was Lesbian Nation. Rather than "a political cop-out," project activism was "the confluence of the personal/political." In such spaces the lesbian had "no vested interest in prevailing cultural forms" and was free to "struggle within her sexual peer group to create wholly new nonhierarchical modes of interactive behavior."¹⁰⁶ So often lesbians bemoaned having to compartmentalize their lives, hiding their sexuality in all but homes and perhaps bars. Claiming the right to exist in the world and make their lesbianism publically visible was a political declaration that they rejected the heteropatriarchy. Integrating personal relationships, community building, arts and culture alongside political organization, bookstore collectives built a world of holistic politics. This was the lesbian feminist work envisioned by Jill

¹⁰⁴ Carol Seajay, "Some Beginnings: An Interview with Judy Grahn, Part Two," *Feminist Bookstore News*, Summer Supplement (August 1990), 61.

¹⁰⁵ Lyndall Cowan, "List of Lesbian Books," *Feminist Bookstore Newsletter 1*, no. 2 (November 1976): np.

¹⁰⁶ Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 181.

Johnston as the “political nucleus of a woman’s or lesbian state—a state that women cannot achieve by demand from the male bastion but only from within from exclusive woman strength building its own institutions of self support and identity.”¹⁰⁷ Lesbian feminist collectives in this period envisioned their work as building towards a revolutionary reforming of society – locally, nationally, and beyond. Theirs was the work of creating a world that truly reflected their values and vision for the future. As such, it had to be comprehensive. The spaces they created, if they were to be the basis for an egalitarian feminist world, would need to incorporate social ties and a cultural offerings, economic sustainability and political engagement. Woman-identified institutions made public a feminist celebration of woman. Through these bookstores lesbians were “reversing the cultural appraisal of womanhood” by elevating sisters above all else.¹⁰⁸

Lesbian lives were visible in bookstores as perhaps nowhere else. Book title after book announced the variety of lesbian experiences and their mere presence declared that lesbian lives were worth knowing. Carol Seajay assessed that content written by or about lesbians composed as much as 40% of sales at women’s bookstores.¹⁰⁹ These numbers indicate that they were a particular draw among clientele. Best sellers included movement texts *Lesbian Nation*, *Lesbian/Woman*, *Lesbians Speak Out*, and *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*. Alongside them were the poems by the likes of Pat Parker and Judy Grahn as well as literature on its way to becoming classic representations of lesbianism: *Orlando*, *Patience and Sarah*, and *Rubyfruit Jungle*.¹¹⁰ Full Moon member Janja Lalich recalls, “We thrived on those books; there wasn’t

¹⁰⁷ Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 278.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁰⁹ Junko R. Onosaka, *Feminist Revolution in Literacy*, 46.

¹¹⁰ Mail Order Packet, Box 1/2, A Woman’s Place Bookstore Records, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

anything else you could find except horror stories.”¹¹¹ Women’s bookstores acquired the reputation of filling the niche needs of lesbian feminists. Janice Gould first entered AWP in search of texts that might answer question, “What does it mean to be a lesbian and a Native American?” She found her first foray a nervous one but eventually became a member of the collective.¹¹² Repeated many times over by countless women, such quests made bookstores into significant sites of lesbian becoming. Even as lesbianism turned increasingly public and identifiable it remained difficult to access information: “the number of books by, for and about lesbians is growing constantly, but making these books available to women outside of lesbian/feminist communities is still a problem. Women who are questioning their sexuality, especially young women, usually have great difficulties finding positive depictions of lesbians outside of women’s bookstores.”¹¹³ These bookstores were one of the few public spaces lesbians could be sure to find an affirming welcome.

Information, print and otherwise, was the core organizing principle for the bookstores but cultural events were essential to the community-building that kept women coming back. Local artists of all stripes shared their talents in these spaces but women-loving women were prominent among them. Paula Wallace (Women’s Press Collective, *Old Wives Tales*) held art shows at Full Moon displaying her photographs of Bay Area lesbians. She was “awed” by her subjects, “these women who saw themselves as strong, who lived independently, who disregarded the male/female boundaries promoted by society, who did not fit the stereotypes cast for us.”¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Janja Lalich, Interview with the Author, July 31, 2015.

¹¹² Janice Gould, e-mail to the author, July 30, 2015.

¹¹³ Claire Crosby, “Review: Confessions of a Young Dyke plus ‘Young, Gay and Proud’ and ‘The Lesbian Primer,’” *Off Our Backs 11*, no. 4 (April 1981): 14.

¹¹⁴ Paula Wallace, “Artist Statement,” <https://www.cla.purdue.edu/waaw/corinne/Wallace.htm>, accessed 6/6/16.

Gwen Avery performed regularly, singing to the audience “I want you to see how sweet a woman’s love can be.”¹¹⁵ Judy Grahn read from her poetry, always to captivated audiences. She might choose “A History of Lesbianism” from *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems* (1971) and explain,

The women-loving-women
in America were called dykes
and some like it
and some did not.

Like her sisters she did not shy away from celebrating lesbians sexual relationships alongside their political goals:

they made love to each other
the best they knew how
and for the best reasons
...
The subject of lesbianism
is very ordinary; it’s the question
of male domination that makes everybody
angry.¹¹⁶

Women from out of town, both unknown and movement celebrities, filled the performance rosters as well. As celebrity grew many of the more well-known artists had to move their performances to larger venues but bookstores remained spaces of intimate solidarity. Lesbians might have to hide from family or stay closeted at work but in these moments they could revel in seeing their sexuality as something to be celebrated rather than feared.

The texts and performances and innumerable activities of these bookstores galvanized lesbian feminism. The richness of such experiences, the value they held in lesbian lives, is best understood through the words of the women who made bookstores home. Janice Gould recalled,

¹¹⁵ Gwen Avery, Sugar Mama Lyrics, http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Gwen_Avery:Sugar_Mama. Accessed 6.6.16.

¹¹⁶ Judy Grahn, *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems* (Oakland: The Women’s Press Collective, 1971), np.

“A Woman’s Place was primarily a lesbian feminist business, organized with a lesbian feminist perspective and politics.... It was a place to gather information about women’s lives, history, and creative works. All of us were being politicized, perhaps radicalized, in various ways during this period, and the bookstore aided in that politicization.”¹¹⁷ In Judy Grahn’s mind they were the radical creation of public space for lesbians: “as soon as there was a bookstore it was like a platform. It was so much more than a bookstore. It was like our college, it was our meeting grounds. It was where all kinds of contentious issues got worked out.... Women poured into that bookstore. It was lesbians doing it.”¹¹⁸ These experiences elevated their confidence in their abilities to continue building toward a revolutionary future. Janja Lalich gushed of her time at Full Moon that “a lot of it was about the crushes,” speaking to these stores as all too rare sites of forming relationships. Within its walls she embraced her sexuality and was able to assume the queerness of the women around her, making flirting and connecting with women a safe activity. She felt a responsibility to build this “cultural hub,” “a woman’s only space,” and to “keep it safe.”¹¹⁹ Patron Wendy Judith Cutler’s perception of women’s bookstores evolved with her own personal journey. Speaking of A Woman’s Place, she recalls thinking of it first as a women’s space, “but then maybe as I came out around that time” her perspective shifted and she understood it as “primarily lesbian feminist space, but it was open to everybody.” Cutler reflected: “It was such a repository of so much. None of those books that were there on those shelves were available in libraries...I could go in that store and look at the shelves...and I could see the new book that was there. It was all happening right then. It was much more than a

¹¹⁷ Janice Gould, email to the author, July 30, 2015.

¹¹⁸ Judy Grahn, interview with the author, February 28, 2014

¹¹⁹ Janja Lalich, interview with the author, July 31, 2015.

bookstore.... The visibility that was there was pretty stunning.”¹²⁰ Bookstores encapsulated Lesbian Nation and created space for women to envision world they sought to create.

The woman-identified nature of the bookstores meant that they were also a site for negotiation between lesbian feminists and other Bay Area lesbians. There were any number of disagreements among lesbians over the meanings of and the proper ways to live their shared identity. Bar dykes, homophile women, lesbian feminists, gay women, and more – they often understood lesbianism differently and lived it differently. Yet their lives overlapped when they looked to the same spaces for solidarity or when experiences with harassment or discrimination made them recognize that survival required mutual support. Across boundaries, lesbian institutions coordinated schedules, advertised each other’s events, and offered direct support where they could. The San Francisco chapter of Daughters of Bilitis, still thriving in the city, coordinated its schedule around Full Moon’s programming, holding its weekly meeting on Monday nights (the one night a week Full Moon was closed). It also donated chairs to help facilitate the coffeehouse’s entertainment programming.¹²¹ DOB founders Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon were featured speakers. A nearby women’s bar also recognized that the presence of another women’s space was a service to the community and worked in collaboration with the coffeehouse. On Mondays when Full Moon was closed the bar made coffee available to those looking for a place to go but not necessarily drawn to the a bar for its usual offerings.¹²² Women of Full Moon ventured out to the bars after hours when looking to dance or to expand the community of women with whom they socialized.¹²³ At times this was rather hypocritical.

¹²⁰ Wendy Judith Cutler, interview with the author, May 24, 2016.

¹²¹ Deborah Goleman Wolf, *The Lesbian Community*, 114.

¹²² Deborah Goleman Wolf, *The Lesbian Community*, 111.

¹²³ Ellen Ullman, interview with the author, August 26, 2015.

Lesbian feminists did not shy away from critiquing bar dykes and butch/femme couples as regressive mimickers of patriarchal institutions. Yet they were also part of the clientele supporting women's bars. A pattern of judgement and infighting existed alongside moments of cooperation and support. If nothing else, this contact kept the diverse groups of lesbians in conversation with each other.

Friction occurred between lesbian feminists and straight women as well, particularly when gay women sought to protect bookstores as queer safe havens. Full Moon was a spot open to all women looking to make feminist friends and find a respite from male dominated society but some woman-identified patrons argued that the coffeehouse should identify more explicitly as a site for lesbian belonging. Such concerns came up during the open meetings organized by the Small and Large Collectives to address internal problems and to welcome community input. Some attendees described incidents where straight women spending time in the store made their discomfort visible when lesbians expressed physical affection for one another. Lesbians resented any suggestion that they should to censor their behavior, particularly in a feminist establishment in the heart of San Francisco's Castro District. If they could not comfortably kiss their partners or hold hands without judgement in the Full Moon, then no place was safe. Other woman-identified patrons raised concern over programming choices featuring artists who were male-identified: "some of the songs and poetry recited by the entertainers concern having male lovers."¹²⁴ At the height of Lesbian Nation, any form of celebrating relationships with men could act as an intrusion upon the separatist ethos held by many in the community. Collective member Janja Lulich recalls divisions between straight women and lesbians reflected in these debates and why lesbians invested so much meaning in Full Moon. "Even in San Francisco," she explained,

¹²⁴ Deborah Wolf, *The Lesbian Community*, 123-124.

“you didn’t feel accepted.” Committing oneself to a women-centered world was her primary means of building an affirming life: “I considered myself a lesbian separatist, after a certain point. I didn’t want anything to do with straight people....it was so important to have these places where you could come together and just be who you were.”¹²⁵ While the Small Collective established the Full Moon as an inclusive women’s space and it continued to function as such during its four year run, lesbian feminists laid claim to it as a key site of collectivity for women-centered women. When community members and patrons made demands of Full Moon and other women’s spaces they made clear their belief in the feminist legitimacy of lesbianism and the right to shape the meanings of separatism.

Participants in project activism were not alone in shaping lesbian feminism through these years; other lesbian groups continued activity in single issue and general political organizations in the Bay Area and around the country. At mid-decade, the legacy of DOB in the Bay Area continued through the activity of the local San Francisco chapter. It was joined by groups in twenty cities around the country. Long after the national structure dissolved, these groups “provided a home for lesbians who needed a low-key, accepting environment.”¹²⁶ Some, such as the Boston chapter, continued to debate its role in sibling movements while maintaining a safe space for lesbians looking for support and engagement. This chapter carried on this work into the 1990s.¹²⁷ In New York, Lesbian Feminist Liberation saw gay women through the seventies, highlighting political issues unique to lesbians as they navigated shifting meanings of lesbian feminism and a changing landscape of activism in the city.¹²⁸ The Lesbian Mothers Union grew

¹²⁵ Janja Lalich, interview with the author, July 31, 2015.

¹²⁶ Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 192

¹²⁷ Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 192-195.

¹²⁸ Kitty Cotter, “Image vs. Reality,” *The Lesbian Feminist* (May 1977): 3.

out of the West Coast Gay Women's Conference hosted by the Los Angeles gay women in 1971. Participants who traveled from the Bay Area found that the conference ignored the needs of, or even the existence of, lesbian mothers. Upon their return home the Bay Area women who engaged in this conversation at the conference decided to form Lesbian Mothers Union. In New York similar action was taken with the organizing of Dykes and Tykes. In Seattle it was Lesbian Mothers' National Defense Fund.¹²⁹ Whether they were constructing service institutions, organizing around a single issue, or operating as a multi-issue political body, these groups with assorted approaches to lesbian politics built relationships locally and nationally, sharing the work of constructing a woman-identified world.

This world also became increasingly diverse during these years as women of color organized around their intersecting identities. In San Francisco Pat Parker formed Gente to create an alternative to a social scene dominated by white women. Parker explained,

it feels so good
to be able to say
my sisters
and not have
any reservations

This poem, titled "gente," and many others like it reflect her struggle with racism among lesbian feminists and the job of coming together with other women of color only.¹³⁰ Gente also developed campaigns to support women of color around the country. In 1975 it helped to form the "Save Joanne" committee to raise legal funds for Joanne Little who killed her rapist.¹³¹ Most notably during this time, the Combahee River Collective spoke for queer women of color

¹²⁹ Deborah Goleman Wolf, *The Lesbian Community*, 142-144; Daniel Winunwe Rivers, *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States since World II* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013): 51, 55.

¹³⁰ Linda Gerber, *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 89.

¹³¹ B.G., "Did We Save Joanne Little?" *Plexus* 2, no. 8 (October 1975): 5.

working to navigate all aspects of their identities. The group's founding statement was issued in 1977 but it took shape in 1974. Combahee was not an entirely lesbian group but "most of the founding women were out lesbians or were in the process of coming out."¹³² They analyzed the intersections of their oppressions and significantly critiqued the ways in which lesbian separatism did not recognize or meet their needs. There was also an agenda seeking radical social change: "As Black feminists and Lesbians we know that we have a very definite revolutionary task to perform and we are ready for the lifetime of work and struggle before us."¹³³ In New York, third world women started Salsa Soul Sisters when faced with the "unwillingness" of existing gay organizations "to share meaningful decision making power with non-white gay men and women." Upon forming, "gay women came out in numbers, giving a death blow to the rhetoric, that there were no third world lesbians around." The organization was a critical source of source of "love" and "support" given to one another, more needed to survival than "demonstrations, rallies, or protest marches."¹³⁴ Lesbian feminists often endeavored to integrate diverse perspectives into their analysis and meet the needs of their entire community. The presence of women of color in these bookstores indicates that such interest resonated with some. And yet for many a separate space was needed, whether in addition to or a replacement for those groups and institutions dominated by white women.

A Woman's Place, Full Moon, and Old Wives Tales functioned as vibrant lesbian feminist institutions. It is not surprising that lesbians were so central to these and similar forays into project activism. The conditions of lesbian lives, free of male partners and more commonly

¹³² Winifred Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 121-127.

¹³³ Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," http://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf. Accessed 5/6/16.

¹³⁴ Salsa Soul Sisters, Our Herstory: The Case for Organizing, Salsa Soul Sisters subject file, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

free of children, allowed gay women to commit their time and energy at a level that many straight women could not. These institutions also held different meaning for lesbians. All women enjoyed them as social, cultural, and political spaces but lesbians had far fewer options than did straight women in finding lovers and like-minded friends. Bookstores were outlets that reduced the amount of compartmentalization they faced in their daily lives. It was here that lesbians could celebrate their sexuality and envision a world in which women's lives mattered in their own right. They were also spaces critical to the support and survival of women just beginning on a path of woman-identification. Bookstores were safe spaces, whether one was seeking to come out or come into revolution. Lesbians from around the Bay Area and around the country understood them as such and thus used bookstores to work toward visions of Lesbian Nation. Given that "every sphere" of the world around them was "controlled at the top by the man," lesbian feminists pursued a path toward liberation in these years "at the local manifest levels of communal fugitive enterprises."¹³⁵ This participation served their needs as it also fostered thriving feminist activity within the women's community. In this way, the woman-identified vision of lesbian feminism fostered a holistic politics vital to the women's movement.

Gay and Straight Together

As much as these bookstores were of and for Lesbian Nation, they were also *women's* venues. They never would have survived on lesbian clientele alone. Nor would such separation have served the goals of lesbian feminism. The collectives explored here chose to organize alongside lesbians specifically but their work was designed to benefit women generally. It was a means of introducing as many women as possible to the pleasure and liberation to be found through woman-identification. In this way the bookstores operated as critical sites of support for

¹³⁵ Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 181.

the Bay Area women's movement as a whole. The choice to separate from (straight) feminism in the early 1970s did not sever relationships between gay and straight women. In the various spaces of project activism feminists of all stripes continued to come together and negotiate the meanings of feminism and the future of women's politics.

Just as lesbians did, straight feminists used these bookstores to socialize, celebrate women's culture, and build their political momentum. A good deal of the daily activities happening in these spaces brought women together rather than separate them. All women could enjoy the art shows, concerts, and poetry readings. These offerings were feminist demonstrations highlighting society's ongoing failure to recognize women's creativity. Debates as to skill and quality of such cultural offerings made visible the ways in which women had long been denied formal training and allowed them to question patriarchal standards of value.¹³⁶ Simply spending time in bookstores made fresh opportunities possible and drew new activists into feminist causes. Nancy Stockwell, for example, met one of the founders of *Plexus* while at A Woman's Place. She explained that this occurred "just after I'd moved to the Bay Area from Boston. Right on the spot I volunteered my unemployment check to cover the third issue."¹³⁷ According to *Plexus* founder Becky Taber it was actually the opening of Full Moon and the success of A Woman's Place that inspired her and her sisters to introduce a new feminist paper to the Bay Area.¹³⁸ In another instance, AWP volunteer Marya Grambs was on shift when she overheard talk of the work Marta Segovia Ashley was doing to shelter abused women. Grambs sought her out and

¹³⁶ Ellen Ullman discussed the hugely variant quality of the artwork produced within the women's movement. Some women believed that their artistic expressions ought to be celebrated no matter the skill level or the outcome, arguing that they should not be held to standards established by formal institutions. Others argued that if they were going to take on painting or photography or such they should put in the time to acquire talents like those of the professionally trained. Ellen Ullman, interview with the author, August 26, 2015.

¹³⁷ Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York: The Dial Press, 1999), 187.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

they established La Casa de las Madres, a shelter for battered Latina women.¹³⁹ These are just a few of the many of examples of feminist movement-building made possible by bookstores.

Moments like the one above speak to the ways in which lesbians and (straight) feminists worked in coalition to define feminist issues and shape campaigns to address them. Violence was key among them in the mid-seventies. The women's movement was busy developing a field of analysis around sexual and intimate violence in these years and building a system to support women in the wake of abusive experiences. It was an issue that all women could relate to and one that unified diverse groups of women, particularly in high-profile cases of women resisting their attackers. In 1972 Yvonne Wanrow shot and killed a man who tried to molest her son in Spokane, Washington. In 1974 Inez Garcia murdered her rapist in California's Central Valley and Joan Little killed her rapist in Washington, North Carolina. Each case galvanized widespread mobilization across groups of women and in the San Francisco Bay Area lesbians closely followed the developments of such cases.¹⁴⁰ They were also actively involved in the Inez Garcia Defense Committee. Former GWL member Louise Merrill was a central figure in this group, which was composed of roughly equal numbers of straight and gay women.¹⁴¹ In February 1975 she authored an article for *Plexus* announcing a march to the State Building to demand recognition of a woman's right to protect herself. Their petition, which was available for circulation at A Woman's Place, called for "a multi-racial women's commission drawn from and responsive to women of lower and middle class incomes" with the purpose of reviewing

¹³⁹ Ibid., 270.

¹⁴⁰ Regular reports of each of these, and others, run throughout *Plexus*. See for example: Carolyn Harper, "Conversation with Yvonne Wanrow," *Plexus* 3, no. 2 (April 1976): 1; "Joanne Little: Trial Begins," *Plexus* 2, no. 3 (May 1975): 5; Nancy Holland, "Inez Garcia," *Plexus* 1, no. 13 (February 1975): 1; Susan Rothaizer, "Inez Garcia at C.I.W.," *Plexus* 2, no 7 (September 1975): 5.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 220.

cases such as Garcia's.¹⁴² The case went on for years and throughout it was a point of shared purpose in the Bay Area women's community. Susan Griffin wrote her poems, Margie Adam performed benefits, Plexus published interviews with her, and women joined organizations in support of the "Viva Inez" campaign.¹⁴³ The community hailed the not guilty verdict reached in her second trial, asserting that it was the result of "the team work of Inez Garcia, attorney Susan Jordan of San Francisco, the Viva Inez Committee, many supporters," and various legal workers.¹⁴⁴ In this and similar campaigns, feminists of various identities found common cause.

Such cooperation was complicated by disagreements as to the meanings and utility of women's spaces; lesbian and (straight) feminists might share an appreciation for participating in women-only experiences while disagreeing as to how they ought to function. The Bay Area women's movement was full of strong, and strongly disputed, ideas about what women's projects should be. When feminist groups saw a new coffeehouse open or a women's paper begin to print, they attached to them a range of political importance. As Full Moon experienced in its first year, those projects that left ambiguous their political positions often found themselves at the center of clashes. The founders of *Plexus*, for example, began their paper to operate as a centralized clearing house for women's news, the name referring to a nerve center or web-like structure. The paper's staff expressed a vague guiding purpose by declaring that they intended to explore "women's consciousness." There was no explicit political position but contributors did

¹⁴² Louise Merrill, "March for Inez and Other Women Prisoners," *Plexus 1*, no. 13 (February 1975): 1.

¹⁴³ Susan Griffin, "Poem Dedicated to Inez Garcia," *Plexus 2*, no. 7 (October 1975): 4; "Inez Garcia: Keep On With The Struggle," *Plexus 2*, no. 8 (November 1975): 7; Toni Chestnut, "Margie Adam and Viva Inez," *Plexus 2*, no. 11 (February 1976): 11.

¹⁴⁴ Susan Rothaizer, "Victory in the Courts: Second Trial of Inez Garcia," *Plexus 4*, no. 2 (April 1977): 1

demonstrate their vision as a feminist paper through the content they produced.¹⁴⁵ The first issue included articles on abortion, midwifery, and International Women’s Day. It also covered lesbian feminist content with reports on a sexual morality law, the Full Moon, and Jill Johnston.¹⁴⁶

Plexus members worked to paint a rich and inclusive picture of Bay Area feminisms. They gave due attention to lesbian issues and did well in looking to the diversity of women’s activities.

Without a clear articulation of political stance, however, it stumbled into conflict. A *Plexus* fundraiser exposed existing tensions around separatism and sexuality (issues at the core of lesbian feminism) within the Bay Area women’s community. Nancy Stockwell, new to the city and the paper, organized a concert featuring movement artists Malvina Reynolds and Be Be K’Roche. The planning session for the event included a reporter from the *Berkeley Barb* who recorded the conversation. Stockwell explained that “we shouldn’t really think in terms of the strictly women’s audience for this benefit, because it’s relatively small.” She went on to say that there were only a few hundred of “us” and that they had little money to give. Stockwell went on to say, “so we have to count on the straighter crowd that likes Malvina Reynolds—of which there are many—to come.”¹⁴⁷ The group determined that the event was to be open to anyone who wished to attend, regardless of political or gender identity.¹⁴⁸ Movement women reacted strongly, traveling the city and tearing down posters, feeling that the event violated unspoken agreements as to the women-centered nature of women’s events.

Responses reflected just how strongly the Bay Area women’s movement valued opportunities to come together without men. One attendee of the *Plexus* fundraiser explained that

¹⁴⁵ Margaret Waldorf Winslow, “*Plexus: The Founding of a Woman’s Newspaper*,” (master’s thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1978), 2-4.

¹⁴⁶ *Plexus 1*, no. 1 (March 15-31, 1974): 1-15.

¹⁴⁷ Gabrielle Schang, “A Women’s Voice,” *Berkeley Barb 20*, no. 4 (August 9-15, 1974): 5.

¹⁴⁸ Margaret Waldorf Winslow, *Plexus: The Founding of a Woman’s Newspaper*, 19-20.

the paper could no longer claim to have “no ideology” because, “in inviting men to its party,” they had taken “a heavy ideological stand which, unfortunately, is counter to virtually all feminist thinking on this issue.” She went further: “the consciousness of the need for separatism at functions where there is dancing has so long been established (at least in this area) that the presence of men Friday night took on an unreal, rather nightmarish quality for many women present.”¹⁴⁹ Lynn Witt, who was part of A Woman’s Place collective, wrote, “having an open door policy towards men at a dance sponsored by and for women seems contradictory...women supporting women is the most important and essential element of the Feminist Revolution.”¹⁵⁰ In order to address this conflict Plexus women called a meeting at the nearby women’s bar Bacchanal in order to hear directly from concerned women. The bar shared *Plexus*’s consciousness in that founders Joanna Griffin and Sande Fini tried to maintain a broad commitment to female clientele without an explicitly political position. During the meeting discussion turned to Bacchanal’s own policies, as some women wanted to “see men on their own turf,” while others believed that with so few places to gather separately, women who wanted to be with men should do it elsewhere. A generally accepted rule among straight and gay feminists to keep men out of events catering to the women’s movement had been broken. Bay Area women practiced separatist feminism, a central tenet of lesbian feminism.

Yet the queer spirit of this separatism was also part of the debate and exposed ongoing tensions around the lesbianism implicit in women-centered spaces. Some of the women involved in the critique valued the women-only policies of concerts and fundraisers because they felt that, of the other women’s spaces that existed, “most are exclusively gay.” One attendee resented

¹⁴⁹Camille E. LeGrand, “Letters,” *Plexus I*, no. 10 (November 1974): 2.

¹⁵⁰ Margaret Waldorf Winslow, *Plexus: The Founding of a Woman’s Newspaper*, 21.

feeling inhibited by the men present but also found herself uncomfortable around so many lesbians wondering “if anyone else wasn’t gay.”¹⁵¹ Among this faction the lesbian feminist nature of bookstores and other projects made them uncomfortable. Wendy Judith Cutler recalls that some among her straight feminist friends found women’s bookstores intimidating: “There were other people, friends of mine who weren’t lesbians, who maybe felt more alienated walking into the bookstore.” One friend in particular described feeling “excluded because it seemed so lesbian, dyke-oriented.”¹⁵² On the other end of the spectrum were lesbian separatists who believed that events planned for the “women’s community” must recognize the boundaries of all participants, including lesbian feminists. Five community women signed onto a letter detailing that “many many women in Berkeley and Oakland” were “pissed off to hear that the benefit dance you were sponsoring to support *Plexus* was a straight dance. It is amazing that a women’s newspaper staff could not see their way to spending one evening without their men. If you want to communicate with the women’s community here, you have to do it where the women are, and that sure isn’t with the boys.”¹⁵³ Their objections highlighted the ongoing efforts among lesbians to find acceptance among their straight sisters. Debates over how separatism ought to function and the role of lesbians within it suggest the ongoing contested nature of lesbianism in the movement. Feminist experiences of the solidarity they found in spaces such as bookstores did not erase debates over sexuality. At times (straight) feminists questioned the queer nature of the various celebrations of shared womanhood. At other times they questioned how welcome they truly were in woman-identified spaces.

¹⁵¹ Lynn Danielle, “Letters,” *Plexus 1*, no. 10 (November 1974): 2.

¹⁵² Wendy Judith Cutler, interview with the author, May 24, 2016.

¹⁵³ Susan Katz, Claudia Belshaw, Karen Berkan, Susan Freedman, Bonnie Speir, “Letters,” *Plexus 1*, no. 10 (November 1974): 2.

Transitions in 1977

Lesbian Nation grew out of grassroots activity tied together through well-maintained networks that spanned the country. California lesbian feminist collectives participated in building women's culture by creating women's bookstores, publications, and music. Others in California contributed to the growth of women's health care, child care, and credit union networks. None were lesbian-only but all benefited a good deal from lesbian labor. The women of these bookstores joined with women's publishers, papers, and distributors to create the women in print movement which formalized through a conference in 1976. Women's record labels and artists regularly came together as community through national music festivals. The Feminist Women's Health Centers of Oakland and Los Angeles helped women in other states support women's health and join their collective. A growing world of feminist credit unions attempted a massive undertaking in the Feminist Economic Network. These webs of activity and the institutions they tied together were critically important in making lesbians an integral part of the women's movement. This dual victory of forging the structures of Lesbian Nation and making a place for lesbians in the work of women's liberation became visible in the events of 1977.

Lesbian activists spent a good deal of the year organizing for the National Women's Conference. In observance of the 1975 United Nations International Women's Year (IWY), the United States Congress approved a conference to be held in Houston at the end of 1977. The plan included a budget of five million dollars and established a formal structure to facilitate planning and participation. State conferences coordinated selection of 2000 delegates as well as the drafting of issues resolutions. Most participants espoused feminist politics though a significant minority opposed the feminist politics of the decade. Conservative women organized at the state level to secure delegate spots so that they might bar the conference from setting a feminist

agenda. Ultimately, they composed about 20% of the conference. They brought a good amount of disruption to Houston but were unable to impede the passage of a progressive agenda.¹⁵⁴

Lesbian feminists were determined not to be excluded in Houston. The 1975 Mexico City conference (the model for Houston) was silent on lesbianism. Initial planning materials developed for the conference were similarly silent on lesbian rights. None of the initial organizers were out lesbians. Planning chair Bella Abzug, however, was an advocate of gay and lesbian equality. Her record on issues relating to homosexuality played a large role in motivating Phyllis Schlafly to coordinate conservative efforts to take over the conference. Lesbians understood that one or two allies would not be enough to ensure representation at what promised to be the nation's largest women's conference to date. They had to mobilize a presence in order to ensure lesbian issues were heard. The years of lesbian nation-building leading up to this point aided them in coordinating a national campaign to secure delegate seats and pass lesbian rights resolutions. In a move away from the grassroots nature of lesbian organizing, the National Gay Task Force (NGTF) played a significant role in making this campaign possible. It utilized the interconnectedness established through Lesbian Nation activism to coordinate efforts, monitor progress, target activism, and keep communities informed.¹⁵⁵ Members of the organization's Women's Caucus tried to communicate with the IWY national commission regarding lesbian inclusion but had little success. These interactions demonstrate that lesbian interests could only be present at Houston through national grassroots mobilization. In the spring of 1977 NGTF

¹⁵⁴ Charlotte Bunch, "A Brief History of Lesbian Organizing for IWY, or, How Lesbian Rights Made it Onto the Agenda for Houston," Box 51/12, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco; Robert Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 312.

¹⁵⁵ NGTF co-coordinator Jean O'Leary spearheaded this effort. The timing of changes to NGTF structure is key here. In 1976 the organization, in a move towards greater inclusion, decided to implement co-chairs so that both a gay man and a lesbian would lead. O'Leary was selected to join Bruce Voeller in 1976. On NGTF's role: "Urge Lesbian Role in Int'l Women's Year Series: NGTF is Informing Groups On How to Participate," *It's Time: Newsletter of the National Gay Task Force* 3, no. 5 (March 1977): 1.

reached out to membership nationwide to alert them to the situation and to issue a call to action. Through the summer months, woman-identified women around the country rallied attendance at state conferences to gain delegate positions and establish support for lesbian rights resolutions.¹⁵⁶

Lesbian feminists succeeded in securing a voice through extensive grassroots mobilization. In eleven states they reached a high of 10% of the delegation.¹⁵⁷ While these numbers were hailed as a success, it seems relatively low given their overrepresentation in the women's movement. This seemingly speaks to the ongoing refusal of the movement to publically support lesbianism as a legitimate political issue. It may also point to some of the problems of lesbian separatism. Due in large part to coalitional organizing, often with women of color, they secured resolutions for lesbian rights in 30 states.¹⁵⁸ California women played a vital role in this work. Home base for the IWY Support Coalition was the golden state. It endeavored to shape coalitional alliances with other women similarly marginalized (particularly women of color) in so that they might support one another's resolutions and attain the necessary support to get them passed.¹⁵⁹ Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon coordinated efforts in Northern California, making use of their personal and political networks that extended back over twenty years to the founding of

¹⁵⁶ Charlotte Bunch, "A Brief History of Lesbian Organizing for IWY, or, How Lesbian Rights Made it Onto the Agenda for Houston," Box 51/12, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ "Women Affirm Lesbian Rights in Houston," *On the Line: The Newsletter of the Gay Rights National Lobby 1*, no. 4 (no date), 1.

¹⁵⁹ Charlotte Bunch, "A Brief History of Lesbian Organizing for IWY, or, How Lesbian Rights Made it onto the Agenda for Houston," Martin/Lyon Papers, Political Organizations/Lesbian Caucus 51/12, GLBT Historical Society.

DOB. Southern California lesbians created the Lesbian Freedom Ride, ensuring large numbers of lesbians traveled to Houston.¹⁶⁰

The work was not over once they reached Houston but the effort proved worthwhile. The chair of NOW's Lesbian Task Force distributed orange armbands for supporters to wear. Lesbians of color such Betty Powell and Barbara Smith reached out to the women of color caucuses. Longtime NOW activists and leaders lobbied Betty Friedan to help heal a significant rift in the women's movement, encouraging her to speak in support of the sexual preference resolution. In a significant shift, she did just that.¹⁶¹ She acknowledged her previous opposition to the issue and then asserted, "We must help women who are lesbians in their own civil rights."¹⁶² Jeanne Cordova, who helped to coordinate the southern California campaign, was featured as one of the speakers for the resolution at the conference. This victory spoke the successes of Lesbian Nation. It indicated the positive relationships built with (straight) feminism and the success of establishing productive solidarity among local lesbian communities. And it demonstrated an important moment when a national gay organization committed itself to women's issues. It marked the coming together of a diverse movement around a shared agenda. Because of this, Gloria Steinem views Houston as "the most important event nobody knows about."¹⁶³ According to her, it was "probably the most geographically, racially, and economically representative body this nation has ever seen" given the way it was composed. The event

¹⁶⁰ "Lesbian Visibility Planned for Houston IWY," Martin/Lyon Papers, Political Organizations/Lesbian Caucus 51/12, GLBT Historical Society.

¹⁶¹ Delores Alexander, previously pushed out of NOW leadership amidst questions regarding her sexuality, urged Friedan to do this just before she addressed the crowd.

¹⁶² Women's Caucus of NGTF, "National Women's Conference Supports Sexual Preference," *It's Time: Newsletter of the National Gay Task Force* 5, no. 1 (January 1978), 1.

¹⁶³ Gloria Steinem, *My Life on the Road* (New York: Random House, 2015), 53.

included “eighteen thousand observers” in addition to the 2000 delegates, who were “chosen to represent the makeup of each state and territory.”¹⁶⁴ The sexual preference plank was perhaps the most controversial (alongside abortion). Steinem saw it as a significant statement: “at last, a majority agreed that feminism meant all females as a caste, and that anti-lesbian bias could be used to stop any woman until it could stop no woman.”¹⁶⁵ In all, 75% of the delegation voted in favor of a resolution that called for elimination of “discrimination on the basis of sexual and affectional preference in areas including, but not limited to, employment, housing, public accommodations, credit, public facilities, government funding, and the military.”¹⁶⁶ It was a striking movement in which a representative feminist body recognized lesbians as feminist actors and lesbian rights as part of the feminist agenda.

Feminists were not alone in Houston; thousands of conservative women demanded they be heard too. When Phyllis Schlafly’s Citizen Review Committees were not able to attain significant representation as delegates she announced a counter-rally that brought 13,000 conservatives to the city to speak for protection of the American family.¹⁶⁷ While their advertisements for the event mentioned the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, and universal childcare as endangering the proper American way of live, the focus of their opposition was support for laws that would protect parental rights of gays and lesbians and protections for gay and lesbian educators.¹⁶⁸ Historian Annelise Orleck called this “the first test of conservative

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 43.

¹⁶⁵ Gloria Steinem, *My Life on the Road* (New York: Random House, 2015), 60.

¹⁶⁶ “The Resolution on Sexual Preference,” *It’s Time: Newsletter of the National Gay Task Force* 5, no. 1 (January 1978): 4.

¹⁶⁷ Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 311-312.

¹⁶⁸ The infamous advertisement for this rally began, “Mommy, when I grow up, can I be a lesbian?” Reprinted in *It’s Time: Newsletter of the National Gay Task Force* 5, no. 1 (January 1978): 2.

women's strength as a political force." They drew upon several years of mobilization, inspired by victories in abortion rights and the campaign for the ERA as well as the increased visibility of the gays and lesbians. Rooted in religious and traditionally female organizations, conservative women turned out to protect "traditional" families. They may not have been able to stop the feminist agenda at the National Women's Conference, but through their activism and in forming groups like Concerned Women for America, these conservatives sparked a new movement that would prove a significant force in combatting feminist victories.¹⁶⁹ This protest was an indication of the type of oppositions lesbians would face in the coming years.

In the days and weeks after the National Women's Conference lesbian feminists evaluated what they learned from the experience. Back in their communities they recognized that "the question in everyone's mind was where do we go from here."¹⁷⁰ The resolution may not have done much in the way of actual change, but it likely helped shore up lesbian feminists' orientation to the women's movement even as they began to be pulled towards cooperation with gay men once again. Among some, the structures and processes that made the Houston success possible spoke to a troublesome shift towards operating per a "male structure" and building hierarchies among lesbians which violated the egalitarianism of Lesbian Nation. Operating under Roberts Rules of Order and a delegate system left many feeling silenced.¹⁷¹ Lesbian theorist and former member of the Furies Charlotte Bunch believed that using such processes did not preclude radical change. She called for long-term "development of a theory of revolution" while

¹⁶⁹ Annelise Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 199-206.

¹⁷⁰ Lesley Mallgrave, "Charlotte Bunch; What Now After Houston?" *Lesbian Tide* 7, no. 5 (March/April 1978): 16.

¹⁷¹ Kathleen Webb, "A Less Than Perfect Union," *Lesbian Tide* 7, no. 4 (January/February 1978): 16.

making “use governmental reform activity to maintain a high feminist profile” in the present.¹⁷²

This sense that shoring up feminist efforts through traditional structures gained strength towards the end of seventies as more formally structured national organizations gained support. The coast to coast coordination that made the sexual preference resolution possible inspired new ideas about the potential of lesbian organizing. Soon, a number of southern California women began to put to use the connections made at IWY to create a national lesbian rights organization.¹⁷³

Conclusion

Lesbian feminists designed women’s bookstores around the needs of a broadly conceived women’s community while also envisioning them spaces of lesbian belonging. The ambiguity and fluidity of the “woman-centered” identity meant that these venues were many things to many people. The three bookstores explored here all grew from collectives composed mostly or entirely of lesbians but were not limited to queer participation. Such limitations were simply not practical. Even in a large city like San Francisco the lesbian community was not large enough to be their sole source of support. It would also require unrealistic policing of personal identities. But the openness of lesbian-run projects was not simply a practical decision. If the key to destroying patriarchy was the construction of a world of women-loving women, then lesbian feminists had a responsibility to foster community building that included all women. The more women they reached with the information, political programming, and cultural celebrations offered through bookstores, the more they contributed to Lesbian Nation. Many women did not necessarily see their patronage of bookstores in such a light. Others who spent in these spaces

¹⁷² Lesley Mallgrave, “Charlotte Bunch; What Now After Houston?” *Lesbian Tide* 7, no. 5 (March/April 1978): 16.

¹⁷³ This was not the first effort to create a national lesbian organization. In 1975 and 1976 a group of lesbian feminists from around the country called themselves an “interim group” to form the National Lesbian Feminist Organization. I have to find much in the way of connection between this and the NLFO of 1978/1979. National Lesbian Feminist Organization (1975/1976) Subject File. Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn.

found them liberatory. Whether through the books in stock, the artists featured, or the meetings hosted, bookstores held tremendous meaning for many in the Bay Area women's community.

Bringing women together, locally and nationally, came with new possibilities and new challenges. With increased national coordination came the pressure of finding agreement among greater numbers of women. This forced lesbian feminists to face the shortcomings of their movement. Forging long term plans also required that they reach agreement on movement structures and priorities. While Lesbian Nation never functioned as a single, cohesive entity, nationwide connections among lesbian communities brought with it contested notions of whether there was a true and correct lesbian feminist practice. Seeing themselves as a part of a collectivity, with greater national presence and greater ability to communicate with one another, debates arose. Such pressures were exacerbated by a changing country. Survival in the increasingly conservative political climate and declining economy meant assessing alliances and considering a release of carefully crafted practices in order to survive. We turn here to another model of project activism, Olivia Records, to consider how Lesbian Nation evolved at decade's end.

Chapter 4

Olivia Records and Questioning (Lesbian) Feminist Futures

Early in the 1970s Meg Christian entertained audiences of women in Washington D.C. as she performed songs infused with feminist perspective. Traveling in woman-identified circles she met former Furies member Ginny Berson and the two became lovers. Christian joined with her and a number of others to dream up a new project possible of making a unique contribution in the women's community. Inspiration came by chance when the two women attended a concert of visiting musician Cris Williamson. Christian had been performing covers of Williamson's music after finding her album in the clearance bin of D.C. record store. By the time of Williamson's visit her audience knew every word of her lyrics and joined her in song. After the show Christian invited her to join an appearance she and Berson had scheduled on the D.C. women's radio show. Their purpose was to discuss "women's music," a term Christian had taken to using but with which Williamson was not yet familiar. While on air their conversation made its way to potential feminist projects. Suggestions included a feminist tap dance company and a feminist restaurant, to which Berson quipped, "where's the feminist content going to be in a menu?" Williamson then went on to discuss the difficulties women faced in the music industry and said, rather offhand, why not a record company?¹

¹ Ginny Berson, interview with the author, June 6, 2013; Barbara Love, *Feminists Who Changed America, 1963-1975* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 494.

Berson recalled this as “the lightbulb moment” she had been waiting for and immediately set to work researching what it meant to make music. She put together a presentation for the full group. Once Berson made the pitch the collective agreed on the spot to create Olivia, a “womanist record company.”² The group considered mythological names and was considering Siren Records but Meg Christian suggested Olivia, taken from a tragic lesbian novel she was reading at the time. They found it “melodic” and “liked the idea of taking from difficult roots and creating something beautiful...sort of owning the history of the way in which our culture has survived over the years.”³ A record company would, they hoped, allow them to convince more women of the joys of lesbianism and broaden the reach of lesbian politics. They envisioned sharing the messages of Christian, Williamson, and others who sang about loving women: “We thought if women knew it was great to be a lesbian, they would consider coming out.”⁴ Berson believed it to be the next step in bringing about revolution. After the initial burst of organizing in Washington, D.C. Olivia traded east for west, moving first to Los Angeles in 1975 and then to the Bay Area at the end of 1977.

The country’s first women’s record company, Olivia Records played a central role in popularizing and spreading “women’s music.” The Olivia collective organized around shared “lesbian feminist politics” in order to “reach beyond those women who are involved with the women’s movement.” Music, they believed, could “slip past those defenses” of women who had not yet embraced feminism. Further, it offered a “room full of friends” to the very many lesbians who still found themselves alone. Meg Christian’s *I Know You Know* was the label’s first full

² Ginny Berson, Interview with the author, June 6, 2013.

³ Judy Dlugacz, “If It Weren’t For The Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records,” *Hot Wire 4*, no. 3 (July 1988): 29.

⁴ Patrick Lettelier, “Judy Dlugacz” Olivia President and Founder Talks about Women’s Music, Lesbian Travel, Retirement Resorts and the Job of a Lifetime,” *Lesbian News 31*, no. 6 (January 2006), 22.

length album. The twenty women who contributed to its production became those very friends for “that woman in Texas” who wrote a letter to Olivia about how the music broke her isolation.⁵ The music carried the political message that loving women could be a joyous experience. Women might unwittingly catch a song on the radio, during a visit to a clinic or café, or at a friend’s house and take a few moments to listen to messages they might not otherwise encounter. Olivia felt that their music filled a void in the women’s movement in both product and process. Feminist businesses, Olivia believed, were a way of claiming power and freeing women from oppressive work environments. They function in a way that moved women another step closer to liberation. Olivia operated on feminist principles and sought to integrate women’s cultural products and economic self-sufficiency with lesbian politics to advance feminist revolution.

The record company emerged in Washington, D.C., a response to the good and the bad of the Furies Collective from which it emerged. The Furies developed fully the concept of lesbian separatism and the political nature of lesbian identity. When the experiment came to an end, former members grappled with what they learned. The dream of the small group collaborative process remained but the commitment to isolationist process did not. While holding onto lesbian feminism as the central organizing force of their new work, former Furies organized around specific projects – feminist business endeavors through which they might better support an inclusive, sustainable women’s movement. Rather than ideological purity being elevated above all else, these new projects prioritized sustainable work. Most of the original twelve members went on to embrace project activism and created cultural products designed to advance political messages and feminist empowerment. Projects included Moonforce Media, Diana Press, *Quest:*

⁵ Nancy Williamson, “Olivia Records: The Women Behind the Discs,” *Plexus* 2, no. 8 (November 1975): 10-11.

A Feminist Quarterly, Women in Distribution (WIND), and Olivia Records.⁶ Each functioned in an egalitarian, cooperative model and aimed to reach a financially sustainable status that would increase feminist employment options for women around the country.

The ability of music to be easily shared and spread quickly meant that the messages of Olivia artists helped to support and to shape the women's movement. It filled women's spaces and even spilled into mainstream culture. The songs offered a shared cultural reference that supported lesbian feminist politics. It encouraged, as Jill Johnston called for, "identification with other women at multiple levels of the physical intellectual and spiritual."⁷ Through this music lesbian feminists separated by great distances were able to feel a part of a cohesive movement, of a joint venture preparing for revolution. Through this music women never before engaged in politics found their consciousness raised and stepped into their first movement meeting or event. And through this music women found the strength they needed to embrace their lesbianism for the first time. The makers of women's music simultaneously enlarged the community of women-loving women and strengthened the women's movement. A Bay Area feminist explained that women's music "succeeded in raising joy and unity among women." In her mind, nothing else "quite equals the exhilaration of singing the "'Song of the Soul' several thousand strong." She believed such experiences to be vital to sustaining the movement: "One night of music accomplished what many have worked year after year to achieve: security and harmony among women. The feeling might be transient, but it is certainly not illusory. It happening once,

⁶ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 271; Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 154.

⁷ Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 157.

therefore it can happen again.”⁸ Examining the rise of Olivia thus helps to illustrate how lesbians, in this case through music, figured as central actors within 1970s feminism.

Olivia reflects both the greatest accomplishments and the biggest challenges of the woman-identified movement. I argue that its successes were central to maintaining the women’s movement even as (straight) feminists continued to contest lesbians’ legitimacy as feminist actors. Olivia’s familiarity to so many made it a useful vehicle through which to understand and debate the changes of the women’s movement at decade’s end. Between 1977 and 1982 lesbian feminists engaged in a period of questioning the future of the women’s movement and their relationship to it. Here, I consider how Olivia was a microcosm for much in the women’s movement as a whole. As the world of woman-identified women grew, activists had to consider how inclusive (or exclusive) it was. While movement rhetoric commonly spoke of supporting and liberating the most oppressed, lesbian feminists (and feminists generally) had to consider whether these women were part of the growing movement. In these years, movement women increasingly debated race, class, and gender identity. Olivia provides one example of how lesbian feminists struggled to through such issues, working to make their ideology of inclusion meet real world practices. Complicated too, at this time, was the issue of staying true to grassroots, egalitarian politics while grappling with a national presence and the need to consider long term survival. Across the movement women debated what type of organizations would best serve to carry their politics forward and debated the meaning of issues such as power, representation, and resources. Present too, was the ongoing dispute over the role of sex and sexuality within feminism. Olivia Records, and through it Bay Area lesbian feminism, offers a common point for considering all of these issues. Further, it raises questions about the long term utility of woman-identification as the proper framework for lesbian feminism. Through this women’s record label

⁸ Toni Chestnut, “Women’s Music: You’ve Got Me Flying,” *Plexus* 3, no. 1 (March 1976): 12.

we get a glimpse of a lesbian feminism that had an impact that belied its small numbers. It was a movement that struggled with but did not ignore intersectional inclusion, that shared the goals of (straight) feminists but remained committed to woman-identified politics, and that experimented with the form and focus of radical political change.

Lesbians Shape Women's Music

What was it that defined women's music? At the broadest of interpretations it was "all music written or sung by women." But there existed a long history of female performers before Olivia, its music spoken of by movement women as a new phenomenon. Scholars do not agree on any one definition. To say that it was "music written by, for, about, and only to women" might be a bit too restrictive, as not all artists limited their audiences or their messages to such a degree. Solid common ground can be found in categorizing it as music "by and for women," aiming for "self-affirmation and mutual support."⁹ Such categorization makes space for wide participation but still situates it within a feminist ethos. Yet others argue for a more specific definition that better situates lesbians within it. In part it was the woman-identified nature of the music that marked it as something new. Even when artists did not envision their songs as politically driven, they created music that relied upon Lesbian Nation to be successful. Lesbian journalist Maida Tilchen argued that women's music was seen by some "as a 'nice name' for lesbian music." She acknowledges the significant participation of straight women in the field but the trends she identifies as typifying women's music skew heavily towards the influence of

⁹ These two definitions are discussed as two extremes in possible definitions. Ruth Scovill, "Women's Music," *Women's Culture: Renaissance of the Seventies*, Gayle Kimball ed. (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1981), 148.

lesbian feminists.¹⁰ Scholar Eileen M. Hayes shares this understanding, explaining women's music as "a site of women's thinking about music, a context for the enactment of lesbian feminist politics and notions of community." She recognizes it as part of a broader women's culture but found it to be "fueled by lesbian energies."¹¹ In this way, "women's music" had much the same utility as did "women-identification." As concepts and practices both grew out of lesbian feminist imaginings of how they could build a movement to empower gay women and also welcome in those women not (yet) identified as lesbian.

The artists themselves did not share a single definition of their shared undertaking. Trying to reach one had the potential to create exclusions, particularly where divisions already existed. In 1974 *The Lesbian Tide* surveyed women's musicians on the subject. They reached out to those artists with whom they were familiar and for whom they had contact information. Casse Culver parsed women's music, feminist music, and lesbian feminist music.¹² Margie Adam expressed concern over the ways "feminism" as a concept had been distorted and instead saw her music as "woman-identified," or "music which is consciously derived from the uniqueness of one's experience as a woman and which speaks to certain life-values that celebrate and liberate." She also highlighted unique values expressed in women's music that she found missing in mainstream music, such as "freedom and equality" rather than "possessiveness and insecurity."¹³ Meg Christian defined it from an artist's perspective as "any music that speaks honestly and

¹⁰Maida Tilchen, "Lesbians and Women's Music," in *Women-Identified Women*, eds. Trudy Darty and Sandee Potter (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1984), 295.

¹¹ Eileen M. Hayes, *Songs in Black and Lavender: Race Sexual Politics, and Women's Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 1.

¹² Casse Culver, "Culture is the Keystone," *The Lesbian Tide* 4, no. 4 (November/December 1974), 4. Culver's experience in the industry is an example of why women's labels were necessary. She performed through the late sixties and signed with a major label in 1970 only to have them refuse to release it because they believed her music was not marketable. She had to fight to be released from her contract and only was able build her career within the women's community in and after 1974. "Casse Culver of Sweet Alliance," *Plexus* 2, no. 3 (May 1975): 9.

¹³ Margie Adam, "In Flux and Evolution," *Lesbian Tide* 4, no. 4 (November/December 1974): 4, 25.

realistically to women about their lives and is not oppressive.” Yet she also considered it as a fan, explaining that it is also “music performed by a woman whose essential feminism I trust.”¹⁴ Alix Dobkin was more thoroughly separatist in her definition, noting that it was music created by women and “listened to by women...it is about women together – women or a woman without men.”¹⁵ Agreement could generally be found in a couple of areas. Artists believed strongly that women’s music had to be honest and affirming of womanhood. They also envisioned their primary audience as women invested in uplift and liberation.¹⁶

Seeking out the earliest performers of women’s music exposes lesbian artists’ influence upon it. Maxine Feldman is believed to have been the first to publicly sing a song about lesbian love during a 1969 Los Angeles performance. She sang about the perils of living a closeted life and ended by proclaiming that she was “in fact damn proud of being a lesbian.”¹⁷ This song, “Angry Atthis,” was the first released recording of women’s music (as a 45).¹⁸ In 1970 women from the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union formed the Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band in order to change the politics of rock music.¹⁹ While the group included lesbian members, it was a sister band in Chicago, Family of Women, that represented a lesbian separatist position.

¹⁴ Meg Christian and Ginny Berson, “Keeping Our Art Alive,” *Lesbian Tide* 4, no. 4 (November/December 1974): 5.

¹⁵ Alix Dobkin, “Roundtable: Musicians Look at Culture,” *Lesbian Tide* 4, no. 4 (November/December 1974): 25.

¹⁶ They agreed that the music was designed for women, to help women love themselves and their sisters. For a time this created a pretty widely agreed upon practices of performing for women-only audiences. Yet by the end of the decade some artists felt that opening shows to men offered a way to advance feminist politics by helping bring their message to members of the oppressive class.

¹⁷ Maida Tilchen, “Lesbians and Women’s Music,” 289.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 288-289.

¹⁹ Naomi Weisstein, “Days of Celebration and Resistance: The Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band, 1970-1973,” in *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, eds. Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, 303-307.

By 1972, established folk singer Alix Dobkin had come out as lesbian and started performing for women-only audiences, ultimately releasing the first album of the women's music movement, *Lavender Jane Loves Women* (1973). In 1973 and 1974, the first concert tours took place as Meg Christian, Cris Williamson, Margie Adam, and Casse Culver each traveled to perform their songs for any audiences of women they could piece together through personal and activist networks.²⁰ Attendance at their shows demonstrated the growing popularity of this genre and prompted ideas for entire festivals featuring women. The first incarnation of the National Women's Music Festival took place at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in 1974 and continues to this day.²¹ It was preceded, however, by an important California event.

The first women's music festival grew out of the 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference. Kate Millett decided on a whim to invite women to California State University, Sacramento for a celebration of women's music, inspired by the cultural offerings of the Los Angeles event. A distinguished visiting professor at the university, she was well situated to quickly secure campus resources. She also drew upon her extensive feminist network to invite artists to perform.²² Feminists from across the state traveled to the capitol to take part in the country's first coordinated celebration of women's music. Sessions included scheduled acts and open mic opportunities. Featured performers Pamela "Tiik" Pollet and Peggy Mitchell met during the weekend and decided to form the band Be Be K'Roche; it became a well-known Bay Area

²⁰ Maida Tilchen, "Lesbians and Women's Music," 289-291.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 290.

²² I have found very little information on Millett's time in California or on this festival. *The Lesbian Tide* reported on her CSUS position as they arranged for her to be a keynote at the WCLC. Jeanne Cordova, "Kate Millett: Professed Gay, Working Revolutionary to Speak at Lesbian Conference," *The Lesbian Tide* 2, no. 8 (March 1973): 7.

band.²³ Newcomer Margie Adam believed that she did not fit the part of woman musician in spite of her passion for writing songs. She had never before performed when a room of fifty women encouraged her to sit before piano and sing.²⁴ Coming together in this way empowered women to find themselves and to find others similarly committed to engaging their talents and their politics simultaneously. There is perhaps no greater demonstration of the quick solidarity built in this and similar settings than in their response to harassment they faced that weekend at the hands of “a group of random Hell’s Angels.” The women circled the men while chanting, some of them naked, until the bikers pleaded to be let free.²⁵ In such a space musicians found that there was a community prepared to support their art done in their own way.

Growing from a feminist grassroots tradition, women’s musicians commonly felt a responsibility to feed the movement culturally and politically. Women’s music, at its most simple, was about artists exploring the realities of women’s lives in ways that were supportive and empowering. The women-centered nature of such messages made it nearly impossible to separate the cultural and political components of this world. In other words, women could not experience women’s music without also experiencing ideas that formed the basis of lesbian feminism. Margie Adam spoke of her concerts as holistic spaces that helped women socialize and organize. To her mind, “there wasn’t really a separation between the culture and the politics and the activism.” She toured as a cultural worker but she also saw that role as having political responsibility: “I could go to the bookstore in any given town and get all of the information I needed in order to weave the politics of the particular town into the introductions of the songs I

²³ “Be Be’Roche,” Aristiik, <http://www.tiik.com/bbkabout.html>, Accessed 4/16/2016.

²⁴ Margie Adam, interview with the author, February 27, 2014.

²⁵ Tiik, comment on Jamie Anderson’s blog Jamiebobamie, “Seeking the Fire: Early Days of Women’s Music,” <https://jamiebobamie.wordpress.com/2011/01/26/seeking-the-fire-early-days-of-womens-music/>. Accessed 4.16.2016.

was going to sing.”²⁶ Opportunities to come together and hear women’s music were opportunities to take action. On the road Margie Adam heard countless stories of concert tours facilitating local activism:

It was also a hunger and a sense of urgency in the audience that was being fed and it was being fed individually in these transformative experiences that happened in the concert setting.... You would come through, there would be a concert, I would hear, “After Holly’s concert we did such and such.” Or, “Meg and Chris did a concert over here and now we have a such and such.” That function of women’s music and the performers, the network, I find that extraordinary.²⁷

For Adam, women’s music was a means of celebrating woman-identification as well as helping the movement to grow by creating opportunities for women together and to find inspiration in doing so.

Audiences did not act as passive recipients; they responded to the politics of women’s music. A common refrain was that women’s music was political because of the feelings it invoked among audiences. Reviewers described how artists conveyed “emotion that FEELS and IS woman-identified without using rhetoric or words.”²⁸ This celebratory spirit satisfied many. Others called for more explicit political affirmation. At the first women’s music festival in 1973 a critique arose in one workshop, finding that the musical offerings were “not sufficiently feminist in form or content.”²⁹ There were those artists who fulfilled this desire for explicitly political themes. Meg Christian’s performance of “Lady,” for example, celebrated the

²⁶ Margie Adam, interview with the author, February 27, 2014.

²⁷ Margie Adam, interview with the author, February 27, 2014.

²⁸ This was Jeanne Cordova reviewing Margie Adam’s first album *Songwriter*. A similar review appeared in *The Lesbian Tide*, evaluating Olivia’s first product, the Williamson/Christian 45, in which Susan Kuhner explained of Williamson, “there’s nothing much political about her music except what is inherent in its woman-loving-woman lyrics.” Jeanne Cordova, “The Personal Prism of Margie Adam,” *The Lesbian Tide* 6, no. 4 (January/February 1977): 36; Susan Kuhner, “Oh Lady, Can’t You Hear the Music?” *The Lesbian Tide* 3, no. 11 (July 1974): 9.

²⁹ “What is Feminist Music?” *The Lesbian Tide* 3, no. 11 (July 1974): 19.

relationships between women in the movement and emphasized their responsibility to one another to as they worked toward liberation.³⁰ When this world of women-centered women shared their political visions, however, other problems arose. For some the messages of female connection proved too homoerotic for their enjoyment. There were plenty of women who avoided it or who complained that, even when not containing explicit lesbian content, women's music was too queer to speak to straight women.

Rarely was women's music an in your face declaration of radical lesbian feminism; instead, artists used their lyrics to celebrate womanhood and sisterhood. Some made lesbianism explicit but this was by no means the primary message. In a 1974 statement Olivia explained, "We are interested in high quality music that is not oppressive to women; music that can be, but is not necessarily overtly political; music that comes from and speaks to all facets of our lives."³¹ While they explained that they would not be making "pamphlet music," they envisioned the music coming out of Olivia would "bring women into some sort of feminist consciousness." It did not have to force the political because "sharing the most essential part of your life" in a way that said "something, nice, real, supportive and positive about a woman's life" was political in and of itself. Collective member Meg Christian explained that she intended her music to be something all women could enjoy: "I don't think it's going to do Olivia any good to put out a heavily lesbian-feminist first album. We are lesbian-feminist but we want to reach a lot of women." The collective selected artists who shared a commitment to woman-identification but it was left to the musicians to determine how and whether such beliefs translated into their songs. Artists and collective members shared a commitment to meet the needs of the women's

³⁰ Susan Kuhner, "Oh Lady, Can't You Hear the Music?" *The Lesbian Tide* 3, no. 11 (July 1974): 9.

³¹ "Olivia," *Paid My Dues* 1, no. 2 (May 1974): 18.

community and to bring more individuals into it. While some musicians crafted explicitly political songs, it was more common for their songs to be woman-identified (but not “preachy”). The last thing they wanted was for their music to feel threatening since it was intended to depict the joy to be found in living women-centered lives.³²

The Rise of a Women’s Record Label

The creation of Olivia was in part a response to the isolation experienced within the Furies model of separatist living. The Furies reached a national lesbian feminist community through their publication but their day to day politics were much more insular. Olivia women maintained the importance of working within a lesbian feminist collective but making music gave them an outward focus and purpose. Former Furies Ginny Berson, Helaine Harris, Lee Schwing, and Jennifer Woodul wanted a project that would better allow them to reach far beyond their immediate community. They searched for an idea that would help them contribute to “a totally separate women’s economy” in order to care for “all our survival needs.” In this way they embraced “economic, political, cultural, all kinds of separation” which was a vehicle for “gaining power for women.”³³ Outwardly, they hoped to connect with “women who were being lesbians but not being political.” The first step was local. Ginny Berson explained, “We decided that we would each try to organize somebody.”³⁴ Through this method they hoped to find a number of other lesbians who might be similarly committed to feminist politics and join in this next project. It was in this way that Berson reached out to Meg Christian. Once they became lovers Berson immersed herself in the music scene and acted as Christian’s manager. Christian

³² Margie Crow, Margaret Devoe, Madeleine Janover, and Fran Moira, “The Muses of Olivia: Our Own Economy, Our Own Song,” *Off Our Backs* 4, no. 9 (September 30, 1974), 2.

³³ Clare Strawn and Tea Schock, “Olivia Records: A Merging of Politics and Music,” *Big Mama Rag* 4 (1974).

³⁴ Ginny Berson, interview with the author, June 6, 2013.

joined the collective as did Woodul's lover Kate Winter. They rounded out the founding group with four women they met at a bar, women who had just arrived from Ann Arbor, Michigan. Among them was Judy Dlugacz who remains with Olivia to this day.³⁵ They were a collective without a purpose until the 1973 radio appearance with Williamson sparked inspiration.

Launching Olivia meant starting completely anew. It was an adventure in experimentation. None of the women held any specialized knowledge of what went into recording and distributing albums. The concept of "women's music" was only just beginning to circulate so they lacked context for even this most basic component of their endeavor. They tried posing as high school students working on school projects and wrote letters to music companies seeking advice. This strategy produced no results. Slightly better luck came from running ads in feminist publications. Christian and Berson spent the summer of 1973 on a tour booked by the latter. While on the west coast they received a response from Oregon-based Joan Lowe, a sound engineer who was deeply closeted but quite interested in lending her support.³⁶ The pair traveled north and met with Lowe for their first crash course on recording music. By the following summer they embarked on Christian's second tour and released Olivia's first recording, a 45 with Meg Christian on one side and Cris Williamson on the other. In just one year's time Olivia transitioned from an idea to a collective capable of crossing the country by tour and by vinyl, part of the earliest efforts to introduce women's music to the movement.³⁷ Through travel and by building relationships with musicians out west, Olivia drew California communities into its

³⁵ Dlugacz remains with Olivia, which has functioned as a women's travel company since 1990. Judy Dlugacz, "If It Weren't For The Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records," *Hot Wire* 4, no. 3 (July 1988): 28; "Judy Dlugacz: President and Founder," Olivia, http://www.olivia.com/Travel/CalendarContent/bio_judy.aspx, accessed 7/14/16.

³⁶ Lowe read about Olivia through a write up in *Off Our Backs*. Margie Crow, Margaret Devoe, Madeleine Janover, and Fran Moira, "The Muses of Olivia," 2.

³⁷ Ginny Berson, interview with the author, June 6, 2013.

work. In August 1974, for example, Meg Christian, Cris Williamson, Margie Adam, Casse Culver, and Andrea Weltman performed a fundraiser for Olivia at Full Moon Coffeehouse and Bookstore (chapter 3). Interest and attendance was so high that women spilled onto the sidewalks, their excitement palpable: “it was past eleven and we had to leave, but the audience wanted more and more, and women hung around for another half hour talking to and hugging the performers.” They found in the music a means to “feel good about ourselves, other women, and the movement.”³⁸ Early successes like these indicated they made a smart choice in music and inspired continued investment in the endeavor.

Members argued the need for independent feminist economic institutions. The collective sought to fashion an enterprise that would provide women with the means to support themselves in “unoppressive situations.” A thriving Olivia would mean “jobs for large numbers of women” that paid based on need and included all employees in decision making. In this model, a bookkeeper held the same value as an artist; each woman made the final product possible. Rather than amass profits, Olivia planned to invest its financial success in new feminist businesses. Under this model a feminist economy had the potential to facilitate liberation for those “who have the hardest time getting jobs under the patriarchy,” specifically, “lesbians, Third World women, and lower and working class women.” Any privilege that entered the collective (via women who held needed expertise) was to be dispersed through skills sharing. This model urged all women to think realistically about financial survival. They needed to demystify money, to create a means of support separate from male systems, and to merge movement activism and work. In an interview Ginny Berson described their inspiration: “we thought the way for women to get power was through economics, by controlling our own economic situation.” Olivia appropriated the oppressors’ tools to claim power for women, but members were quick to stress

³⁸ Scarlet Cheng, “Olivia Benefit,” *Off Our Backs* 4, no. 10 (October 1974): 23.

that they were not a capitalist endeavor. Profits went into improving the capacity of the collective, all members were part of the financial decision making, and all financial records were made available to the public.³⁹

A shared politics made Olivia's work possible. Succeeding as a collective required that members began from a common foundation. Members built trust around the belief that "women who love women and who commit all their energy to women have a greater stake in building a world in which all women can live in comfort and safety."⁴⁰ Their commitment to lesbian feminist values came with an egalitarian process, accountability to the women's movement, and products that empowered women. At times their individual interpretations of women-identification varied but confidence in their shared values made them "clear about our priorities" and instilled trust in each other as they made "a billion little decisions." It also kept them from getting "bogged down" in the process. "Every decision" was informed by their sense of accountability to the women from whom their money came.⁴¹ Their music was a way to bring their politics into the lives of all women with a dream of "a world in which women control everything."⁴²

Olivia managed a strong start in Washington, D.C. but it was soon apparent that they needed to relocate to a place that gave them ready access to production tools and resources.

Christian's tours and experiences on the road informed the decision. She and Berson witnessed

³⁹ Olivia Records Distribution Information, Box 14/22, Diana Press (Collection 2135), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library; Margie Crow, Margaret Devoe, Madeleine Janover, and Fran Moira, "The muses of Olivia: Our Own Economy, Our Own Song," *Off Our Backs* 4, no. 9 (September 30, 1974), 2.

⁴⁰ Olivia Records Distribution Information, Box 14/22, Diana Press (Collection 2135), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

⁴¹ Nancy Williamson, "Olivia Records: The Women Behind the Discs," *Plexus* 2, no. 8 (November 1975): 11.

⁴² Olivia Records Distribution Information, Box 14/22, Diana Press (Collection 2135), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

sites of vibrant feminist activity and lesbian community. They also interacted with other pioneering woman musicians such as Margie Adam, helping to establish a feminist music network.⁴³ In weighing their options they were drawn to Hollywood industry resources of southern California. Important too was the active women's community in the city of angels. Further, they already relied upon a Los Angeles company for the mastering and pressing of their records. Being so far away made it difficult to advocate for themselves in an industry that did not take women seriously. Release of Christian's first album was delayed by "mastering labs and pressing plants" that returned products "which were noisy, scratched, and in general detracted from the high quality of the music." They had to repeat the process seven times before they were satisfied with the outcome.⁴⁴ The move eased some of the problems they experienced while on the east coast. Once in L.A. they could walk into the shop and listen through proofs directly. This new home also eased travel on Lowe, who continued to work with and train the women. In May 1975 half of the original collective (Ginny Berson, Meg Christian, Jennifer Woodul, Kate Winter, and Judy Dlugacz) made the journey west.⁴⁵

The combination of access to a thriving feminist scene and music industry facilitated quick growth of the record company. During the two years in Los Angeles Olivia Records welcomed in new participants until it included eight collective members and fifteen workers.⁴⁶ They reached out to new artists including BeBe K'Roche, Teresa Trull, and Gwen Avery.

⁴³ Judy Dlugacz, "If it Weren't for the Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records," *Hot Wire* 4, no. 3 (July 1988), 29.

⁴⁴ The Women of Olivia, "Replacing Clout with Persistence (sic)," *Plexus* 2, no. 3 (May 1975): 2.

⁴⁵ Ginny Berson, Interview with the author, June 6, 2013; Judy Dlugacz, "If It Weren't For The Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records," *Hot Wire* 4, no. 3 (July 1988): 31.

⁴⁶ Mareen Oddone, "Lesbian Concentrate: Olivia's Answer to Anita," *The Advocate* no. 225 (October 5, 1977): 30. All workers had equal say and received salary based on their needs. Belonging to the collective, however, required greater commitment and thus not all workers affiliated with Olivia were actually part of the collective.

Christian and Williamson continued to record and release. Poets Judy Grahn and Pat Parker released a spoken work album. In response to Anita Bryant's Save Our Children campaign Olivia produced a benefit album titled *Lesbian Concentrate*. This project furthered efforts to develop relationships with new female artists. During this time they also located more professional women who had the experience to staff each step of the production process and to streamline the internal workings. They even found knowledge from the mainstream industry with former executive Liza Williams joined Olivia as a means of escaping the sexism she could no longer tolerate.⁴⁷ This growth set them on solid footing and they looked to relocate once more.

All of the original five, joined by a number of newer workers, headed north to Oakland in the final days of 1977. Collective member Robin Brooks explained, "Right now we're in two houses and paying rent on five separate apartments." Moving was a necessary financial and practical decision for the group since they would be better able to purchase property in the East Bay.⁴⁸ Berson explained that they had done what they needed to in Los Angeles by gaining a stronger understanding of the industry and developing the necessary connections. But it was also an "industry town." It was "dominated by Hollywood" and was "so spread out" that it complicated their goal of living and working as a tightknit collective. The Bay Area posed an appealing alternative. They felt it was more supportive of "alternative institutions" and that the smaller, more condensed urban environment would suit them. Another incentive was that San Francisco was home to Linda Tillery with whom they were developing an important working relationship. She was not willing to relocate. Ultimately, collective members found northern

⁴⁷ Mareen Oddone, "Lesbian Concentrate: Olivia's Answer to Anita," *The Advocate* no. 225 (October 5, 1977): 30.

⁴⁸ "Community Focus," *Lesbian Tide* 7, no. 2 (September/October 1977): 32.

California to provide the “nurturing, supportive community” they sought.⁴⁹ As they settled into the San Francisco Bay Area fourteen members lived together in one home and set about exploring their new community.

Making music was hard work that Olivia members loved to do. They shared a “fierce love for every baby part” of the process, which made the demands worthwhile.⁵⁰ This labor included finances and bookkeeping, advertising and promotion, graphic design, artist and vendor contracts, screening new artists, recording and touring, technical components of album production, distribution, bookings, and more.⁵¹ With time each woman carved out her niche role; this was necessary given the specialized skills required for certain aspects of the making records. They worked to have an understanding of each other’s tasks, however, and understood the “shitwork” was to be shared equally. Artists and collective members together worked through creative ideas and sound mixing in rented studio space (though they hoped to eventually own their own studio).⁵² They involved as many women as possible in the actual recording, engineering, and production of the albums. In this way, more and more women trained in the necessary technical skills. Frustrating limitations came in the form of studio space and the mastering, processing, and pressing of albums. The collective envisioned owning their own studio and further removing men from the process. Even with these frustrations, they found great pleasure in what they were able to accomplish having started from an entirely blank slate.

⁴⁹ Ginny Berson, interview with the author, June 6, 2013.

⁵⁰ Nancy Williamson, “Olivia Records: The Women Behind the Discs,” *Plexus* 2, no. 8 (November 1975): 11.

⁵¹ Mareen Oddone, “Lesbian Concentrate: Olivia’s Answer to Anita,” *The Advocate* no. 225 (October 5, 1977): 30; 30; Olivia Records Distribution Information, Box 14/22, Diana Press (Collection 2135), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

⁵² Judy Dlugacz, “If It Weren’t For The Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records,” *Hot Wire* 4, no. 3 (July 1988): 29-30.

Consider, for example, that they were so excited upon receiving the cover for their first album that they slept with it, awaking in the night to look at it again and again.⁵³

Recording began with the very artists who inspired Olivia's conception. Meg Christian and Cris Williamson were the label's first and most successful artists. But the collective was earnest about wanting to be a label that fostered more than one kind of music. San Francisco-based group Be Be K'Roche's eponymous album blended Latin, blues and jazz styles. *Where Would I be Without You* featured the spoken poetry of Pat Parker and Judy Grahn. To continue this diversification they made use of contacts in communities around the country to issue calls for artists. Concert tours allowed them this reach, but so did their distributors. Olivia's work with Be Be K'Roche and Teresa Trull grew from the urging of a number of women who worked in its distribution network. Linda Tillery recorded her own work after producing the first Be Be K'Roche album. By 1977 Olivia was on solid footing and had a number of albums in circulation that were selling well. Olivia made increased effort to recruit artists who would further diversify the world of women's music. They managed to do this to some degree with the benefit album *Lesbian Concentrate*, as well as the recording of Gwen Avery's 45 in 1977 and then Linda Tillery and Mary Watkins in 1978. The collective also partnered with smaller labels and those women who self-recorded, distributing their albums to better increase circulation of artists throughout the women's music scene.⁵⁴ Such partnerships further expanded Olivia's influence in the world of women's music.

The making of women's music happened in a relatively intimate environment but bringing the finished product to women required them to turn ever outward. Concerts and word

⁵³ Nancy Williamson, "Olivia Records: The Women Behind the Discs," *Plexus* 2, no. 8 (November 1975): 11.

⁵⁴ Olivia Records Discography, <http://queermusicheritage.com/olivia.html>, accessed 3.25.16.

of mouth in feminist communities helped to expose women to Olivia's work. Advertisements in women's press helped to build a solid mail order system. But most important was the network of distributors that they put together in its first couple of years. By late 1975 over 30 women represented Olivia around the country. Some contacted Olivia directly and asked about getting involved in this way. Others responded to ads or were inspired to get involved after participating in post-concert rap sessions.⁵⁵ Their work included getting albums into women's businesses and into alternative and mainstream record stores. It might also entail selling products at local political and cultural activities and working to get local radio stations to play Olivia artists. They needed local press to review the music and record stores to provide display space. When concerts came through town distributors functioned as local promotional forces. By mid-1976 the system had grown to 58 distributors.⁵⁶ This included "women of color and white women, working class and middle class women, mothers and non-parents, older women and younger women."⁵⁷ In this way the distribution program was another way to expand participation and diversity of representation.

As with much else in Olivia, the distribution system changed in 1977. Distributors began purchasing albums for resale rather than receive pay through a commission system. This shift eased Olivia's workload and gave the distributors more control. It allowed them to establish their own businesses in which they set their own prices and work conditions. This benefited the

⁵⁵ Nancy Williamson, "Olivia Records: The Women Behind the Discs," *Plexus* 2, no. 8 (November 1975): 10.

⁵⁶ For information on distribution: Jennifer Woodul, "Olivia Records Talks about Collectivity, Part 2," *Sister* 8, no. 1 (February/March 1977): 11 & 15; Jennifer Woodul, "From Olivia: What's this about Feminist Businesses?" *Off Our Backs* 6, no. 4 (June 1976): 24; Nancy Williamson, "Olivia Records: The Women Behind the Discs," *Plexus* 2, no. 8 (November 1975): 10.

⁵⁷ Introductory Distribution Packet, Box 14/22, Diana Press (Collection 2135), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library; Olivia Records Distribution Information, Box 14/22, Diana Press (Collection 2135), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

women themselves and the women's movement; a woman in control of her own time, they believed, would be "another woman with a little more energy for political work."⁵⁸ While the collective members recognized that wages from this work alone did not make a living wage for these women, they planned for their growth to eventually make it so. Olivia saw a potential for empowerment in this work while also recognizing that how women experienced this work would be shaped by their local conditions and political commitments. In their guide to distribution the collective dedicated a good deal of attention to the practical components of establishing a business but it also addressed ethical and political issues to express full support for distributors. By the end of the 1970s some women made enough to support themselves. Others chose to work in teams. Olivia announced a plan to sponsor distributor conferences twice a year where they could to share strategy. They believed this would be an important space in which to discuss the politics of Olivia. Communication was also facilitated by a distributor's newsletter.

This new system likely grew out of the increase in independent women's labels and the connections made between distributors. The system above laid out for Olivia distributors helped facilitate those relationships. In May 1978 Olivia, Wise Women's Records (Maine), and Redwood Records (California) agreed to contract with distributors jointly. They hoped that this system would ease competition and improve the chances for women to make a living from this work. Each maintained their own policies in addition to issuing joint guidelines. According to journalist Maida Tilchen, this may have been in part a response to demands of the distributors themselves. The workers responsible for getting music into the hands of the local women organized amongst themselves and created the Women's Independent Label Distributors (WILD). They carved out territories to limit competition and advocated for systems that made

⁵⁸ Jennifer Woodul, "Olivia Records Talks about Collectivity, Part 2," *Sister* 8, no. 1 (February/March 1977): 11 and 15.

this work economically feasible. These cultural workers saw their labor as a political service to the women's community. One explained that getting music into small town stores was an important act that expanded feminist accessibility in diverse geographical regions. Their labor made the industry possible. They made visible the work of women operating outside of oppressive industries to create their own products and separate systems of economic survival.⁵⁹

Olivia worked to support the distributors and to ensure that they in turn advocated for the collective's woman-identified values. The label was transparent about its lesbian feminist identity. Distributors did not have to share these politics but Olivia expected "everyone to be able to represent them."⁶⁰ The distribution guide began with a discussion of values and made it clear that it hoped to work with women who would help to strengthen the women's movement. But the guide was more than that. It described in detail how a record was made, how to get materials carried by stores and negotiate prices, how to coordinate with Olivia to order materials, how to handle invoicing and bookkeeping, promotion, and more. Perhaps most important, these directions included an explanation for and advice on working with men. In order to reach as many women as possible, the work of circulating women's music often required interactions with "slimy men." This included getting songs played by local radio stations and records in male-owned stores. Many regions did not have women's stores of any kind and even where they did exist there were women not inclined or too fearful to enter them. Once introduced, they believed, women would attain the music elsewhere and eventually dealing with male establishments would not be necessary. They made it clear that Olivia did not expect distributors to do anything that made them uncomfortable and that it was up to them to set the boundaries of

⁵⁹ Maida Tilchen, "Lesbians and Women's Music," 293.

⁶⁰ Olivia Records Distribution Information, Box 14/22, Diana Press (Collection 2135), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

what they were willing to do and tolerate: “We don’t expect you to put up with huge amounts of shit,” explained Olivia, but “we expect you to put up with some shit.”⁶¹ As the music industry began to pay attention to women’s music at the end of the decade Olivia believed that soon these male dominated institutions would seek out Olivia music and these troubling dynamics would change.⁶²

The label worked to develop tours, workshops and special events alongside the task of making the music. Performances took place in any (women-centered) space they could locate and initial audiences were small. As momentum built, however, and as artists developed followings, the crowds grew. Particularly helpful was the strengthening of friendship between Meg Christian, Cris Williamson, Margie Adam, and Holly Near, the four of whom toured together in 1975. The *Women on Wheels* tour “took the audience size from about 500 to 2,000, literally overnight” thanks to the “incredible environment” they created.⁶³ They brought the name Olivia with them and thus made it an increasingly national force within women’s music as well as within feminist networks. At home, Olivia marked record releases, special events, and political causes with regular performances, making it an active center of women’s music within local communities. They celebrated Cris Williamson’s *Live Dream* release even before it was available for purchase with a concert at the Berkeley Community Theatre.⁶⁴ Olivia celebrated the move to Oakland with a crowded show at the Oakland Auditorium in December 1977. The

⁶¹ Introductory Distribution Packet, Box 14/22, Diana Press (Collection 2135), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

⁶² Olivia Records Distribution Information, Box 14/22, Diana Press (Collection 2135), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

⁶³ Judy Dlugacz, “If It Weren’t For The Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records,” *Hot Wire* 4, no. 3 (July 1988): 29-30.

⁶⁴ Lisa Orta, “Cris in Concert,” *Plexus* 5, no. 6 (August 1978): 9.

crowded event featured a full line up of Olivia artists, old and new. In the audience “everyone was glowing with excitement” over “celebrating Olivia’s move to the Bay Area.”⁶⁵

By this time, the collective believed that the potential for growth was unlimited. The L.A. years had been good to label. In 1975 it had one album. By 1977 members had cut four of them. When arriving in southern California Olivia consisted of five unpaid members. In 1977 fifteen paid workers supported themselves through this work.⁶⁶ The initial run of 5,000 copies of Christian’s *I Know You Know* sold out in a matter of months, a shock to the collective that figured this run would cover the life of the album. Williamson’s *The Changer and the Changed* was even more of a surprise, selling 40-50,000 annually in the years after its release.⁶⁷ By the fall of 1977 they were on target to reach \$300,000 gross profit for the year.⁶⁸ Increased production helped them bring in additional workers, which was an important part of their vision of expanding the diversity of the collective and offering non-oppressive economic self-sufficiency to greater numbers of women. They also had the funds and capacity to support political campaigns and to highlight the work of women color. In Olivia’s hands, lesbian feminism was moving swiftly along.

Politics of Olivia

Lesbian feminist motivations infused each element of Olivia’s activity. Establishing the collective’s policies making an album, producing a concert – each was political. The collective paired their internal political processes with outward demonstrations of feminist values. It

⁶⁵ Lila, “Olivia: Tillery and Others Showcased,” *Plexus* 4, no. 12 (February 1978): 11.

⁶⁶ “Commentary,” *Paid My Dues* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 44.

⁶⁷ Judy Dlugacz, “If It Weren’t For The Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records,” *Hot Wire* 4, no. 3 (July 1988): 29.

⁶⁸ Mareen Oddone, “Lesbian Concentrate: Olivia’s Answer to Anita,” *The Advocate* no. 225 (October 5, 1977): 30.

flourished, demonstrating that feminist methods of production were possible and that there was great demand for women's cultural products. Olivia's growth and the capacity of music to spread widely made it a nationally visible representation of woman-identified culture. This made its decisions all the more significant, given that they shaped discussions about and meanings of women's community. As founder and longest member Judy Dlugacz explained, "In retrospect, it's clear that we were a nationally visible organization, one of the very few who was seemingly successful at that point—so what we did, and how we made our decisions, affected other things. We were seen as *representing* a lot of people who either like or didn't like what we were doing."⁶⁹ Feminists placed the record makers under a microscope, scrutinizing their internal methods, selection of artists, and political strategies. Interrogating how Olivia enacted its politics within the community, as well as how the community responded to it (and other similar feminist ventures), shines light on the nature of feminism at decade's end as well as ongoing conflict over lesbianism within it.

Olivia used music to respond to political issues. Anita Bryant's Save Our Children campaign sparked the first national backlash against the gay rights movement and prompted a response from lesbians across the country. Activists found themselves joined by a new wave of participants as gays and lesbians outed themselves to join in political resistance. Olivia wanted to empower women struggling with their sexuality as a result of Bryant's hate speech and to support the activism defending those people targeted by Save Our Children. They found the answer in a benefit album, *Lesbian Concentrate, A Lesbian Anthology of Songs and Poems*. Pulling from music already recorded and bringing in new artists, the record was put together in just a number of weeks, even recording in the collective's living room to speed the process. They

⁶⁹ Judy Dlugacz, "If It Weren't For The Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records," *Hot Wire* 4, no. 3 (July 1988): 30.

described it as “political and cultural, as well as entertaining.” They intended for it to reach beyond activist lesbians to “the lesbian in the bar, the feminist lesbian, the lesbian mother and hopefully those women who are lesbians in the closet.” They also hoped to convey the pride to be found in owning one’s lesbian identity and to raise greater awareness of lesbians’ role in politics. Proceeds went not directly to Florida campaign against Bryant but to the Lesbian Mother’s National Defense Fund with the understanding that “it is time to Save OUR Children.”⁷⁰ In this way, they engaged with the shifting political landscape of gay politics. But they also maintained commitment to directing their energy solely to women. An album insert situated Olivia’s work within the larger political landscape. They envisioned a “new world” with “no power heirarchies (sic),” “in which we control our own bodies, our work, our sexuality, our communications networks, our culture, our living spaces, our recreation, our media, our very survival.” Olivia believed that “legalities don’t change the realities” of the day to day misogyny women experienced and continued to advocate living outside of the systems of the “anti-woman society” as much as possible. They supported lesbians who were under attack while maintaining a belief in separatist organizing as the proper path forward.⁷¹

Women musicians often volunteered their time with benefit shows and tours in support of feminist causes but also tried to integrate opportunities for consciousness-raising into regular shows. The 1976 Women on Wheels tour through California reached 10,000 women in two weeks as the first major tour of lesbian feminist artists. Margie Adam, Cris Williamson, Meg Christian, and Holly Near incorporated a campaign to raise awareness about women in prison and collect musical instruments and sheet music for incarcerated women. The tour included a

⁷⁰ Country, “More Hard Core From Olivia,” *Lesbian Tide* 7, no. 2 (September/October 1977): 28.

⁷¹ Quoted in a review of the album. mer, “Review: Lesbian Concentrate,” *Off Our Backs* 7, no. 8 (October 1977): 17.

rally at the capitol building in Sacramento.⁷² In the same year Margie Adam performed for an “all-woman audience which packed the auditorium” of a local college in support of the Viva Inez defense fund. The show included members of Viva Inez who spoke to Garcia’s case specifically and anti-rape activism more broadly.⁷³ Benefit shows were infused with purpose but so too were concerts organized to showcase artists’ work. A concert to introduce the Bay Area to Cris Williamson’s new album *Live Dream*, jointly organized by Olivia and Berkeley Women’s Center, was “a celebration of friendship and solidarity, of political awareness and activism, of women’s culture and music.” Olivia member Michelle Clinton spoke from the stage “on the new developments in Jeanne Jullion’s [lesbian custody] case, the Lesbian Schoolworkers defeat of Propositions 6 and 7, voter registration and the Bakke decision.” Organizers made informational materials and voter registration available and ensured accessibility through inclusion of a sign language interpreter.⁷⁴ In the same year, with the political stakes at an all-time high, Olivia joined with Redwood Records to raise funds to defeat the anti-gay Briggs Initiative.⁷⁵ Meg Christian partnered with Holly Near (who established Redwood as a label under which to release her music) to raise money for this fight to protect California’s lesbian and gay teachers. True to feminist form, the event included child care and sign language interpreters at an accessible location.⁷⁶

⁷² Inside/Out Flier, Women’s Music folder (box 10, folder 9), Sally Roesch Wagner Papers, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Library, California State University, California.

⁷³ Toni Chesnut, “Margie Adam and Viva Inez,” *Plexus* 2, no. 11 (February 1976): 11.

⁷⁴ Lisa Orta, “Cris in Concert,” *Plexus* 5, no. 6 (August 1978): 9.

⁷⁵ The Briggs Initiative, formally on the California ballot as Proposition 6 in 1978, proposed to bar gays and lesbians from teaching. It was named for its author, California state senator John Briggs. Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015): 366-384.

⁷⁶ “Advertisement,” *Plexus* 5, no. 8 (October 1978): 3.

As with the *Lesbian Concentrate* album, this activism reflected community engagement on their own terms. When raising funds to fight Prop 6 they directed donations to two groups: Lesbian Schoolworkers and the Bay Action Coalition against the Briggs Initiative (BACABI).⁷⁷ Lesbian Schoolworkers provided an outlet for separatist organizing. It also prioritized attention to the intersections of oppression and pushed for gays and lesbians to combine their opposition to Briggs with opposition to expansion of the death penalty which was also on the ballot. Together with BACABI it reached out to those groups sure to be overlooked by Concerned Voters for California, the more mainstream coalition organizing in opposition to Prop 6. They customized messages for targeted audiences. Gays and lesbians of color went into communities of color and raised awareness about shared oppressions. Others developed talking points to explain to unions how Prop 6 would affect collective bargaining.⁷⁸ Lesbian Schoolworkers continued its work after Briggs and demonstrated an ongoing commitment to radical politics. It organized with lesbian musicians such as the Berkeley Women's Music Collective to plan women-only benefits for issues of importance to its diverse membership, including organizing against police violence and supporting affirmative action.⁷⁹ By opting to channel funds into these groups Olivia was able to do battle with a political system it rejected while staying true to separatist methods.

Partnering with groups like Lesbian Schoolworkers was not the only way Olivia worked to support a more inclusive lesbian feminism. As already mentioned, once Olivia was on solid footing it began to pay more attention to the composition of the collective. By the time they left L.A. members set a policy that no additional white women would be added until there was a

⁷⁷ "Advertisement," *Plexus* 5, no. 8 (October 1978): 3.

⁷⁸ Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 370-380.

⁷⁹ Lesbian Schoolworkers Present Berkeley Women's Music Collective, Box 1/Notebook 2 of 2, Meg Barnett [Lesbians Against Police Violence] #89-5, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

more equitable representation of women of color. This move was important to their politics but they also felt it was necessary to assure that they better met the needs and interests of feminists of color. Part of the motivation to move to Oakland was to build a relationship with African American Linda Tillery as producer and artist. The women's community recognized the gesture, seeing her work on Be Be K'Roche's album as a significant step in "bringing some musical and cultural variety to Olivia products."⁸⁰ Similar politics guided the partnerships they established with artists. Between 1977 and 1982 Olivia recorded nine LPs (they produced a total of seven between 1974 and 1977). Of the five new artists recorded four were women of color and the musical styles included the influences of jazz, blues, funk, classical, gospel, and rock.⁸¹

To introduce these artists and their range of musical offerings to national audiences the collective organized a 1978 tour titled "The Varied Voices of Black Women." They hoped to build an interest in musical stylings other than traditional women's folk, which was dominated by white women. The tour included musicians Linda Tillery, Vicki Randle, Mary Watkins, and Gwen Avery. Poet Pat Parker was also a part of the project, her politically charged black lesbian feminist poetry a key component of each show.⁸² The work of these artists was recognized in various ways. Linda Tillery's self-titled album, for example, won "a Bay Area Music Award as best independently produced record of 1978."⁸³ Olivia was disappointed in the sales numbers of these new artists and struggled with how to maintain a commitment to diversifying while needing to fund it from a movement that had not yet turned on to this music. Olivia maintained its commitment to the politics of supporting women of color artists. The problems they had in

⁸⁰ t.c. "Be Be K'Roche," *Off Our Backs* 7, no. 1 (February 1977): 18.

⁸¹ Olivia Records Discography, <http://queermusicheritage.com/olivia.html>, accessed 4.1.2016.

⁸² Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution*, 259.

⁸³ Larry Kelp, "Tillery's Trip from Classic Bass to Rock," *The Tribune Calendar* (September 18, 1983): 25.

building support for them likely resulted from their own blind spots when it came to race as well as those of the movement as a whole.

Race was not the only issue they struggled to address within Lesbian Nation; the record label spurred renewed debate over the role of transwomen in the movement when it hired sound engineer Sandy Stone. The issue initially came to a head in 1973 with the West Coast Lesbian Conference when organizers included transwoman Beth Elliott on the program but then receded into the back ground somewhat.⁸⁴ While in Los Angeles the collective searched for a California-based engineer. Prompted by a recommendation from friends, they interviewed Stone. Judy Dlugacz recalls that “she had tremendous credentials.” At a time when few women had access to such training, she was a unique find. While preparing to work with Stone on Be Be K’Roche’s first album they received a call from Boo Price. In the studio recording Margie Adams next album, Price heard from studio staff that “Sandy was a transsexual.” Price felt obliged to alert Olivia. Dlugacz took the call, noted the news, then “got off the phone and called over to Kate Winter to ask what a transsexual was.” The collective was confused and conflicted. Members did not have much knowledge about subject and expressed a degree of concern for Stone’s privacy as they sought out information. After confirming the news, the collective spent “countless hours” of discussion on whether to continue the relationship. The collective concluded that she was well-qualified and that they found her to be “a very kind and caring person.” They also recognized her as part of a “very oppressed minority” who had “given up a lot of privilege.” With this, they decided to sustain their relationship and keep Stone on as their engineer.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ One indication that this is the case is in a search of women’s periodicals. *Off Our Backs* has no mentions of “transsexual” between 1973 and 1978. *The Lesbian Tide* had no mentions between 1973 and 1977.

⁸⁵ Judy Dlugacz, “If It Weren’t For The Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records,” *Hot Wire* 4, no. 3 (July 1988): 30-31.

Debate occurred around the country and Olivia faced significant backlash, though opinion was by no means uniform. *Dyke: A Quarterly* took up the issue of transwomen in the movement and Olivia's partnership with Stone in vehemently negative ways. Editors damned "male transsexuals" (transwomen) for "invading the women's movement" and "trespassing in Lesbian communities." They argued that Olivia's reasoning, that Stone "renounced male privilege," defined womanhood as a state of oppression.⁸⁶ Letters to *Dyke* in the following issue praised their analysis, though we cannot know whether this was representative of the movement, whether it spoke to the type of feminist who read *Dyke*, or whether it showed careful selection on the part of the editors who held clear anti-trans politics. Janice Raymond suggested the controversy's influence in her own thinking when promoting her infamous book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-male* in 1979. She and *Off Our Backs* reviewer Susanna Sturgis situated the book amidst "acrimonious controversy" inspired by Stone specifically.⁸⁷

Positions expressed elsewhere offered a bit more nuance and even acceptance. *Plexus* features editor Rani Eversley gendered transwomen properly and asked for them to write in and share their own experiences. She questioned the privilege with which transwomen were raised and their reasons for choosing to live as women, but she called out the fear that created the feminist community's "negative reaction." She suggested that the spirit of feminism, to challenge patriarchal binaries, encouraged at least a willingness to engage with and learn from transwomen.⁸⁸ Writing for *Sister*, C. Tami Weyant acknowledged her own struggles with the topic but concluding that "only feminism can offer them safe harbor" from the oppression they

⁸⁶ "Transsexuals in the Women's Movement," *Dyke: A Quarterly* 1, no. 5 (Fall 1977): 29-35.

⁸⁷ Susanna J. Sturgis and Jan Raymond, "An Interview with Jan Raymond," *Off Our Backs* 9, no. 9 (October 1979): 14.

⁸⁸ Rani Eversley, "Genderism," *Plexus* 4, no. 4 (June 1977): 14. It is unclear if anything came of this call.

faced and that rejecting transwomen simply on the basis of this identity made feminists the oppressors.⁸⁹ There also appears to have been a network of friendly support in the face of the controversy, built through longstanding lesbian-feminist networks. Stone wrote a letter (on Olivia letterhead) to Coletta Reid of Diana Press, responding to a request for feedback on Raymond's manuscript. This request indicated a level of trust and genuine interest in publishing responsibly on the subject. Stone called the book a "red herring" but also pointed out that this opinion came from "a position which I am sure is biased because of my own background." Her sign off also included a hand-written "Hi Casey!" to Reid's partner, suggesting friendly relationships between the women.⁹⁰ Olivia thus (re)inspired controversy on the issue. But their decision to support Stone may have encouraged some within the community to approach the issue with greater openness than before.⁹¹

Through these activities and others Olivia sought to be engaged beyond the daily work of making women's music. The heart of their activism was tending to the label so that it would eventually provide greater capacity to support women and the women's movement. But the collective also tried to arrange for its members and its artists to be actively involved in the community politics around them. In this way they helped to channel much needed funds into feminist and gay causes, to increase the visibility of women underrepresented in the movement,

⁸⁹ C. Tami Weyant, "Transsexual Feminism?" *Sister* 9, no.4 (August/September 1977): 6.

⁹⁰ Sandy Stone, "Letter to Coletta Reid," Olivia Records, Box 14/22, Diana Press Records (Collection 2135), UCLA Archives, Charles E. Young Library.

⁹¹ This subject deserves much greater attention. A valuable starting point is the just published article "Women-Identified Women: Trans Women in 1970s Lesbian Feminist Organizing." It contests the narrative of an anti-trans lesbian feminism by looking more fully at the Beth Elliott conflict at the 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference. The positions expressed in the publications I cite here suggest there could be a regional differentiation. Generally, the California feminist papers *Sister* and *Plexus* offer more openness to the issue than did the D.C. based *Off Our Backs* and the New York *Dyke: A Quarterly*. The two instances of national debate as to trans women in the movement did occur in California. Emma Heaney, "Women-Identified Women: Trans Women in 1970s Lesbian Feminist Organizing," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1-2 (May 2016): 137-145.

and to push lesbian feminists to reconsider the most central concepts of who belonged among them.

Structures of Feminism and Lesbian Power

Olivia members understood themselves as both a political collective and a feminist business. There was nothing antithetical to them in holding both titles simultaneously. In any description of their work, members emphasized cooperation and collaborative decision making as “the basis for political trust.” They were very clear that being an “economic institution” did not make them “a capitalist business.” All profits went back into Olivia to build its capacity to record more woman-identified artists and hire more women. The collective explained,

“We consider ourselves accountable to each other and to the larger community of woman-identified women for every decision we make. We publish our financial report annually in the feminist press. We ask for feedback on every product we put out. We answer every letter that is sent to us. We know that our support comes from the feminist community, and we respect that support and feel accountable for it.”⁹²

They believed so firmly in this model that they shared their knowledge in any way they could. In late 1977, for example, collective members joined a concert tour to hold workshops and share what they had learned through their first several years as a recording collective. As founding member Ginny Berson explained, “We took a workshop to various cities on our tour to share some skills and to share information about our process—both politically and financially.”⁹³ Olivia was not alone in claiming that economic power was a vital tool in liberating women. Throughout the project activism of Lesbian Nation activists sought to create self-sufficient institutions that supported the movement and its workers. Yet Olivia’s national reach, visibility, and transparency laid these politics open to scrutiny.

⁹² Olivia Records Distribution Information, Box 14/22, Diana Press (Collection 2135), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

⁹³ Ginny Berson, “Olivia for the Record,” *Off Our Backs* 8, no. 4 (April 1978): 16.

The rise of feminist credit unions created a new way for women to invest in one another and ultimately shaped perceptions of Olivia's politics. The Detroit Feminist Federal Credit Union (DFFCU) was the first of its kind, opening on Women's Equality Day 1973. Founders envisioned it as "a women's self-help financial center—owned and controlled by its members."⁹⁴ In the following years it served as a model for others around country and in 1975 it reached out to them to create a formalized national network. In May at an exploratory meeting of the eight existing feminist credit unions, representatives agreed to meet again in November to charter the network with DFFCU taking the lead. In the interim, DFFCU invited additional participants, selectively reaching out to a number of feminist institutions. The bylaws drafted by the Detroit women provoked controversy and created a rift among the seventy five participants. DFFCU joined with Diana Press, New Moon Publications, and the Oakland Feminist Women's Health Clinic to create the Feminist Economic Network (FEN). The remaining representatives, about 60 women in total, represented eleven credit unions, *Quest*, and *Big Mama Rag*. They established the Feminist Economic Alliance. The central point of disagreement was how decision-making would work. While the Alliance committed itself to an egalitarian grassroots structure, FEN declared "financial leadership of the feminist movement" and confined "decision-making power within the organization to women who are on the Board of Directors." With money from DFFCU, FEN purchased the Detroit's Women's City Club building to act as a national hub of the movement. The entire venture was rife with conflict. FEN held a grand opening on April 9, 1976. By the end of August it folded, the leaders fleeing the city and the building signed over to DFFCU.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ "Feminist Credit," *Off Our Backs* 3, no. 10 (September 1973): 9.

⁹⁵ Becky Taber and Nancy Stockwell, "FEN: Is it Really Dead?" *Plexus* 3, no. 8 (October 1976): 6-7.

Little else provoked as much vitriol in the lesbian feminist community as the events surrounding FEN's rise and fall. Many well-known lesbians were at the heart of this effort and California lesbian feminism was deeply entangled in the course of events. Laura Brown and Barbara Hoke, founders of Oakland Feminist Women's Health Clinic, joined with DFFCU's Joanne Parrent as the key forces within the Network. Diana Press coordinators Coletta Reid and Casey Czarnik held longstanding friendships with west coast lesbians, including members of Women's Press Collective, A Woman's Place, and Olivia. When FEN failed, Laura Brown and Barbara Hoke made their way back to Oakland and their jobs with the Feminist Women's Health Clinic. Joanne Parrent joined the Board of Directors and the L.A. Women's Building. Reid and Czarnik initially returned to Baltimore but quickly decided to relocate Diana Press to California, where it merged with what was left of Woman's Press Collective.⁹⁶ These developments, as well as the various reconfigurations of intimate relationships that occurred during the FEN experiment, were the topic of much lesbian feminist gossip.

Letters dashed across the country as Lesbian Nation sought to make sense of what happened and what fallout was at hand. Charlotte Bunch (*Quest*), June Arnold (Daughters, Inc.), Nancy Stockwell (*Plexus*), Cynthia Gair (Women in Distribution), and Judy Grahn (Women's Press Collective), among others, kept the coasts in conversation. At the end of 1976 Nancy Stockwell wrote to Charlotte Bunch, "We're about to have the second great battle of the Women's Civil War." She wrote just one week later with developments, explaining that "the shit is getting ready to hit the fan out here." A third letter followed at month's end. They detailed

⁹⁶ The Women's Press Collective announced that it was disbanding in the summer of 1977. Announcement of this end explained that it was too small and "economically backward" which, among other things, excluded "working class women" from participation. In order to be a strong force in the movement presses needed to be "more complex structures" with the potential to publish "in greater volume." When the press was severely damaged the following year, many in the community believed it was tied to ongoing rifts and arguments tied to the FEN debacle. Women's Press Collective letter, Box 5/6, Diana Press Records (Collection 2135), UCLA Archives, Charles E. Young Library.

who took sides with whom and whether it might create irreparable harm to the movement they had struggled so long to build.⁹⁷ The scope of the debate spoke to the interconnectedness of lesbian communities and the role that California women played within it.

The women of FEN described their politics much in the same way that Olivia did but their implementation differed in significant ways. Laura Brown explained that they intended to “create a matriarchal structure, have a woman-run world.”⁹⁸ Kathleen Barry, one of its biggest supporters, described FEN and the Detroit Women’s City Club as “an economic and cultural context in which to begin to grow free from patriarchy.”⁹⁹ And yet much of their behavior did not demonstrate the same commitment accountability and transparency as Olivia. Directors commonly refused to speak on the record with feminist press. The only reason significant reporting came out the founding conference in November 1976 was because one of the feminist credit union representatives present was also a contributor to the Colorado feminist paper *Big Mama Rag*. Instead, they disseminated carefully crafted statements, leaving the community to rely on word of mouth and disaffected participants for information. Both the record label and the economic network took shape through self-selection and added new members carefully and slowly. The directors of FEN claimed movement leadership, however, while Olivia eschewed hierarchy. Further, FEN leadership developed a secret, detailed “values assessment” system that they used to evaluate their own workers and groups seeking to join the building.

Criticism abounded. The women’s community appraised it as capitalist, elitist, and corrupt. The Feminist Women’s Health Centers (FWHC, a national network of women’s clinic)

⁹⁷ Nancy Stockwell letters to Charlotte Bunch, Charlotte Bunch folder, Nancy Stockwell Papers, San Francisco Public Library.

⁹⁸ “FEN: Do the Facts...” 15.

⁹⁹ Kathleen Barry, Press Release, Box 14/12, Diana Press Records (Collection 2135), UCLA Archives, Charles E. Young Library.

believed FEN to be individualistic and exploitative of employee labor. FWHC severed ties with the Oakland clinic over its membership in FEN.¹⁰⁰ Ex-members said the network recruited them to work in a feminist utopia only to find that it honored few of its commitments. Women questioned the decision to invest so heavily in the Women's City Club Building and found the membership fee to be elitist. They also worried that it would draw money away from already strapped local feminist non-profits.¹⁰¹ The lack of transparency, self-proclaimed movement authority, and emphasis on profit were more than most feminists were willing to accept. By the time most of these details came to light the experiment was over, but the community continued to debate the events and the meaning through the following year.

Olivia had a relationship with FEN and tried to remain balanced when wading into the skirmish. It only issued a formal statement when Martha Shelley's contested exposé mentioned the record makers specifically. Jennifer Woodul wrote a statement on behalf of the collective to explain its relationship to the politics and people of FEN. Much of the letter addressed the tactics by which Shelley reported on FEN, rather than the nature of this new attempt at economic liberation for women. Olivia women were both curious and skeptical when they heard of the network, given the absence of open invitation to participate and their subsequent exclusion from preliminary meetings. They reached out to discuss ideas about "money, feminist structure, resource sharing, and visions" and found their exchanges to be productive. While not agreeing with them entirely, Olivia planned to join with FEN in publishing a paper in six parts discussing

¹⁰⁰ This disassociation is all the more striking given that Carol Downer (founder of the Feminist women's Health Centers network) was the mother of Laura Brown (director of the Oakland clinic.)

¹⁰¹ Why FEN Must be Opposed and Response to Martha Shelley's Trashing of FEN, Box 14/12,, Diana Press Records (Collection 2135), UCLA Archives, Charles E. Young Library. Such critiques are not surprising given that membership ran \$100 for perks such as pool usage and retail discounts. FM, "Economic Briefs and Beefs," *Off Our Backs* 6, no. 3 (May 1976): 1.

what they had learned about their shared values.¹⁰² Woodul did not issue a point for point rebuttal. Rather, she emphasized points that spoke to Olivia's own ideas about feminist businesses. She argued that legal structures of a feminist collective meant little to how it ran internally. They simply reflected what they had to do in order to navigate "the Man's world." Regarding decision making and authority, Woodul pointed to the impossibility of handing power over "to all women." To be able to function, "feminist businesses must be run by women who share common politics and a trust that comes from working together around them." Woodul emphasized the importance of reserving judgement and listening to the positions of each party involved.¹⁰³ Perhaps aware that criticism of FEN could easily be criticism of Olivia, Woodul included a reminder of the collective's commitment to "publicize all our major decisions, plans, expenditures, and political commitments as completely as we can," including "our current thinking and process around money and its effect on and potential use by the women's movement—as well as related political issues."¹⁰⁴ This statement did little to insulate the collective from the fallout.

Details of FEN began to emerge in the summer of 1975 and within months the feminist press directed greater scrutiny at feminist businesses as a whole. As with other movement concepts, "feminist business" was amorphous and contentious. Critics believed that the two concepts, "feminism" and "business," were antithetical. The nationally circulated, Washington, D.C. based feminist periodical *Off Our Backs* published a heavy critique by contributors Brooke Williams and Hannah Darby who argued that businesses could not function outside of the

¹⁰² I have yet to confirm whether this project ever came to fruition.

¹⁰³ Jennifer Woodul, *Trashing is Garbage: Olivia Records on the Martha Shelley FEN Statement*, Box 14/12, Diana Press Records (Collection 2135), UCLA Archives, Charles E. Young Library.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

capitalist system.¹⁰⁵ Rather than feminism modifying the meaning of business, feminism was depoliticized and commodified by using capitalist methods. Williams and Darby did well in summarizing the breadth of critique. These businesses were marginal, shored up the capitalist system, and helped industries coopt feminism. As such, they would never be able to empower more than a small group of women. There were two issues, however, that were more central to their critique. First, they lamented that businesses were the most visible of movement entities and thus had disproportionate power to shape feminism's public image; their "undelegated power helps to determine the direction of the movement." This power was viewed all the more troubling because of it was most commonly built around cultural practices. Women's businesses also drew energy away from the true work of the movement by pulling attention away from political organizing. Secondly, Williams and Darby argued that rather than building up the movement, feminist businesses sapped its energy. They took money from movement women without providing opportunities for them to decide how it would be spent. They were skeptical that these entities had any intention of properly reinvesting in the movement.¹⁰⁶

Many threads of feminist thought channeled through the feminist business debate. Certainly, socialist feminists objected to the use of capitalist methods and argued that they held no potential as movement strategies. Olivia acknowledged the problem of doing this, but saw it as a creative temporary solution to gaining some semblance of economic stability for women during the process of revolution. Members further explained that their collective methods made

¹⁰⁵ In the following discussion I rely heavily on articles from *Off Our Backs* and *Plexus*. While I am working to diversify sources and integrate more content from other sources, it does appear that these two publications held particular sway in shaping national dialogue around contested issues. Consider, for example, that the women of the DC women's bookstore First Things First used these two publications to build their own analysis of the debates over feminist businesses. First Things First, "Means, But Not to the End," *Off Our Backs* 6, no. 5 (July/August 1976): 30.

¹⁰⁶ Brooke L. Williams and Hannah Darby, "God, Mom and Apple Pie: 'Feminist' Businesses as an Extension of the American Dream," *Off Our Backs* 5, no. 11 (January/February 1976): 18-20.

Olivia as anti-capitalist as was possible. Critiques of their exploitative potential were valid; in some ways, Olivia (and the small number who reached similar levels of sustainability, for however short a period of time) was the exception that proved the rule. Discussions of gaining money and power read as heavily capitalist, and yet even those activists who critiqued Olivia spoke of the need for both to drive the movement forward.¹⁰⁷ There were genuine ideological rifts between socialist and radical feminists. A good deal of the criticism, however, was about more than a single form of feminist ideology.

This debate continued through the women's community and in the pages of *Off Our Backs* (*OOB*), *Plexus*, and other publications over the next couple of years, focusing increasingly on Olivia.¹⁰⁸ *OOB* made clear its anti-business sentiments and it developed an adversarial relationship with the record label. The paper acknowledged its differences as an ongoing issue in the summer of 1978. While addressing a misunderstanding over an article copyright, the paper collective acknowledged that "our relations with Olivia are at a low ebb."¹⁰⁹ The Williams and Darby article, published early on, made a point of excluding women's papers, and therefore *OOB*, from the world of feminist businesses. Women's papers, they argued, were not designed with the purpose of "making money" but as "outlets for [feminist] propaganda."¹¹⁰ Given that *OOB* had the power to shape this dialogue, it is difficult to determine whether there was a clear

¹⁰⁷ Williams and Darby emphasized the importance of money in the movement. They disagreed, however, on where that money should go and who should determine its use. They argued that all movement money should be invested in organizations that were fully politically identified.

¹⁰⁸ While these were not the only feminist/lesbian feminist papers of the time, the two appear to have facilitated a good deal of the national dialogue of the women's community. To make public its response to critique, for example, it published its statements in these two periodicals. First Things First, "Means, But Not to the End," *Off Our Backs* 6, no. 5 (July/August 1976): 30.

¹⁰⁹ Off Our Backs Collective, "Copyright Wrongs," *Off Our Backs* 8, no. 7 (July 1978): 30.

¹¹⁰ This exclusion included distribution companies as well. Brooke L. Williams and Hannah Darby, "God, Mom and Apple Pie: 'Feminist' Businesses as an Extension of the American Dream," *Off Our Backs* 5, no. 11 (January/February 1976): 18.

consensus on this interpretation. They did publish responses from Olivia as well as letters of support for them. Critique was unrelenting, as were laudatory letters of such critique. Responses to “God, Mom, and Apple Pie” were “unusually voluminous,” indicating that there was much interest in it.¹¹¹ When Olivia Artists performed in Washington, D.C. in 1977, collective members joined. Meg Christian and Teresa Trull performed and then joined Ginny Berson to conduct a workshop on feminist businesses. Review of the workshop praised Olivia’s description of its internal processes, but questioned its ability to articulate “what both the process and records have to do with feminist revolution.” The *OOB* reporters present felt that the collective members “failed to help us understand their politics-in-practice and how it fits into the larger picture of feminism.”¹¹² Time and again, critics stood firm that Olivia simply could not be part of the feminist revolution.

Olivia responded regularly to these critiques and women throughout the movement expressed support. The label reiterated its politics time and again; they recognized the limitations of existing methods, emphasized the feminist processes they employed, and highlighted how it contributed to the movement. Olivia summarized its politics as follows:

“bringing women together, breaking down isolation, spreading the concept of woman-identification, using money for political work (which includes paying salaries—one of the crucial elements in Olivia’s becoming a mixed group), helping to fund a mass movement of women, the importance of our process not only for ourselves but as a possible model for other feminist groups to use, and much much more.”¹¹³

The popularity of women’s music brought with it regular recognition of Olivia’s cultural contributions but supporters addressed the political dimensions of the work too. Poe Asher wrote

¹¹¹ “Letters,” *Off Our Backs* 6, no. 1 (March 1976): 26.

¹¹² Terri Poppe and Janis Kelly, “Moving Money if Not Mountains,” *Off Our Backs* 7, no. 10 (December 1977): 16.

¹¹³ Ginny Berson, “Unfair Blast at Olivia,” *Off Our Backs* 8, no. 4 (April 1978): 16; Jennifer Woodul, “From Olivia: What’s This About Feminist Businesses?” *Off Our Backs* 6, no. 4 (June 1976): 24-26.

to Plexus in show of support for the record company and argued, “Olivia’s very existence is political” through the “lesbian and feminist and anti-racist” messages that the music spread.¹¹⁴ Judith Mealing and Cynthia Cauthern wrote a letter responding to *OOB* critiques of the collective. They gleaned, “Olivia records employs all women, puts out a product completely controlled by women, except for pressing and studio time; distributes that product entirely through women; pays collective members on the basis of need; generates money for the use of the women’s community; will hire no more white women until the collective is racially balanced.” They concluded, “it seems to me that Olivia records confronts the ‘nitty gritty’ every second of their existence.” For these women, what the record label offered the community was of the highest political import. They suggested that the real reason for critique was rooted in the woman-identified priorities of the collective. Mealing and Cauthern asserted, “You seem unable to understand the political, economic, spiritual, and ethical statement generated by the word and concentrated by the act of lesbianism.”¹¹⁵ They were not alone in their assessment.

Criticism of Olivia’s work and its artist’s music commonly invoked concerns over its woman-identified nature. Evaluation of an Olivia workshop questioned how the label’s “pro-lesbian” line “fits into the larger picture of feminism.” The authors questioned whether lesbianism was a worthy feminist or political goal and declared, “Politics and lesbianism do not necessarily go hand-in-hand.”¹¹⁶ Wendy Stevens argued that music about women loving women represented “a lack of growth on the musician’s part,” not moving beyond “sexual preference.” For Stevens, woman-identified music was lesbian music, and “being a lesbian isn’t necessarily a

¹¹⁴ Poe Asher, “In Praise of Olivia,” *Plexus* 5, no. 2 (April 1978): 2.

¹¹⁵ Judith Mealing and Cynthia Cauthern, “Women Loving,” *Off Our Backs* 8, no. 2 (February 1978): 22.

¹¹⁶ Terri Poppe and Janis Kelly, “Moving Money if not Mountains,” *Off Our Backs* 7, no. 10 (December 1977): 16.

political statement.”¹¹⁷ Similar sentiment came with review of Olivia’s *Lesbian Concentrate* when “Mer” said the album “falls into the trap of defining our whole identity by our sexuality.”¹¹⁸ Lila of Women Fight Back Network, writing for *Plexus*, reviewed Olivia’s debut concert upon moving to the Bay Area. She praised the music endlessly, but critiqued Olivia, calling it “strongly lesbian separatist-identified.” In her view, the music divided women, interpreting songs about “women loving women” as entirely sexual and thus alienating straight feminists and, more importantly, women yet to take up the cause of liberation. She explained, “Olivia describes itself as a feminist business trying to help change women’s traditional roles and functions but it is contradicting itself by not addressing its music to all women.”¹¹⁹

Olivia and its supporters maintained the political importance of speaking openly about lesbianism and working toward a woman-identified feminist movement. Collective members saw the ongoing criticism as (straight) feminism’s way of “questioning whether lesbianism is a political goal.” They were appalled by such questioning and believed it to be part of an ongoing effort to negate lesbianism as a “‘real’ political” issue. Olivia’s official position continued to be that “any political analysis that does not include the importance of lesbianism and its profound connection to woman-oppression and the ultimate liberation of all women is sadly lacking.”¹²⁰ Kathy Tomyris of Ladyslipper Music similarly interpreted the critiques of *OOB* and others as being “anti-lesbian.” She lauded Olivia as “doing enormously good work” through the “energy,

¹¹⁷ Wendy Stevens, “Meg and Teresa: Drop of Rain or Hurricane?” *Off Our Backs* 7, no. 10 (December 1977): 16.

¹¹⁸ Mer, “Lesbian Concentrate,” *Off Our Backs* 8, no. 8 (October 1977): 17.

¹¹⁹ Lila, “Olivia: Tillery and Others Showcased,” *Plexus* 4, no. 12 (February 1978): 11.

¹²⁰ Ginny Berson for the Women of Olivia Records, “Olivia: For the Record,” *Off Our Backs* 8, no. 4 (April 1978): 16.

music and politics” spread by its music.¹²¹ As part of a conversation over whether women’s concerts should be closed to men Margaret Sloan stated that the real issue at play in such a debate was “woman identification.” Speaking from a wealth of movement experience, Sloan detailed how, “for the most part, we have founded the presses, the bookstores, the credit unions, the women’s center. It is we who will carry on the culture in our poetry prose and song. In spite of all the energy that has been generated by lesbians in the Feminist Movement, we are still in the place of ‘excuse me.’”¹²² Sloan raises a critical point. Olivia, a collective of woman-identified activists, was a pivotal force in creating one of the most far reaching feminist projects of the decade and yet they were still being confronted by feminists who did not believe they were legitimate feminist activists.

Wrapped up in the disapproval of Olivia’s methods and politics was the ongoing concern feminists held about the place of woman-identification in the movement. Detractors were not simply questioning whether a feminist business or a cultural enterprise should represent the women’s movement – they were asking whether lesbians had a right to represent the movement. Drawing from the concerns over businesses functioning as feminist entities as discussed above, we know that there was concern over the visibility and power (financial and otherwise) of Olivia and like institutions. Considered alongside debates as to the political meaning of lesbianism, it becomes clear that at least a portion of the debate surrounding the record label had to do with just how much control lesbians had in defining feminism’s values and trajectory. Reviewing Cris Williamson, *Plexus* writer Susann Shanbaum spoke repeatedly of the power of the music. Shanbaum believed that this was a collective power that would empower women to “rise up and

¹²¹ Kathy Tomyris, “Unfiar Blast at Olivia,” *Off Our Backs* 8, no. 4 (April 1978): 16.

¹²² Sloan was a founder of Ms. Magazine and the National Black Feminist Organization. Margaret Sloan, “The Issue is Woman Identification,” *Plexus* 3, no. 4 (June 1976): 7.

take control of their lives.” She was not troubled by the power the artist and the label held because “she sees the power she has not as hers alone and therefore feels responsibility for how it is used.”¹²³ Others in the movement did not have such faith in the power held by a group over which they had little control.

These discussions of feminist structures and sexuality also call into question the long term utility of the concept of woman-identification. By the end of the 1970s these debates over the political nature of lesbianism often lost sight of what pioneering lesbian feminists meant when they asserted the centrality of their sexual identity to the project of women’s liberation. This may have been due in part to the very blurring of boundaries between gay and straight feminists that the concept of woman-identification helped to create. Perhaps it was an indication of the ways in which lesbian feminists had succeeded in normalizing lesbian sexuality within the movement. Or maybe it spoke to the entry of younger women into the movement whose lesbian identity was not contingent on their politics. There are, I think, a number of ways to interpret this state of affairs. This conversation needs much further investigation and further mining of sources. My preliminary exploration does demonstrate, however, that lesbianism remained a contested issue within the women’s movement throughout the 1970s even as lesbians contributed a great deal of labor in sustaining it. It also suggests that by the end of the decade the dream of a revolution driven by woman-identification was coming to an end.

Olivia Getting to Ten and Beyond

Getting to ten years was not easy. Movement disputes took their toll on Olivia. The collective produced nine LPs in this period but enthusiasm began to fade. The quick growth of their early years encouraged sizable expansion. They never expected that the excitement with

¹²³ Susann Shanbaum, “The Changer and the Changed,” *Plexus* 2, no. 11 (January 1976): 12.

which the first albums were received would be unmatched with future ones. Balancing their feminist processing of new members with the day to day work and the strain of serious financial troubles became too much to bear. By the end of 1978 they reached out to a consultant who offered to help them assess their problems. Her findings forced Olivia members to take seriously their limitations. It was a sobering moment but also an opportunity to reevaluate members' commitment to the collective process and changing political interests. Their realization that Olivia would not "grow and grow" to become a feminist business providing countless new jobs "took a lot of spark out of" the work.¹²⁴ By 1980 the collective was composed mostly of the founding members but soon they too would move on to other work. Ginny Berson and Kate Winter left in 1980. By this point Berson felt that Olivia was no longer empowering her to pursue her passion.¹²⁵ Winter experienced general burnout and frustration over accusations that she put "sexually-explicit" content on an album cover.¹²⁶ When Meg Christian left in 1984 Judy Dlugacz was the only founding member still a part of the label. While Olivia had to change in order to survive, it succeeded in maintaining woman-centered politics throughout its years of making women's music.

As women's musicians went out into the world they negotiated a movement in flux. By 1980 the radical separatism of Lesbian Nation was no longer a given. Olivia found among the most radical feminists a desire to maintain a woman-identified vision. Mary Watkins and Linda Tillery incited uproar when they performed a concert in which they made use of male musicians. The surprise of this unannounced development speaks to the understanding that women's music would be women only. For some in the Bay Area, this amounted to a "deceptive, divisive act."

¹²⁴ Judy Dlugacz, "If It Weren't For the Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records," *Hot Wire* (January 1989): 20.

¹²⁵ Ginny Berson, Interview with the author, June 6, 2013.

¹²⁶ Judy Dlugacz, "If It Weren't For the Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records," *Hot Wire* (January 1989): 20.

When the audience responded with “vocal protest” and Tillery responded only with “a resounding, offensive finger,” these women felt deeply the violation of “precious territory, gained through bloody, arduous, tenacious work over a long period of time.”¹²⁷ Yet there was also a growing audience of liberal women, and men too, who wanted to enjoy these artists in a less politically charged environment. Such audiences were in some ways a sign of Olivia’s success. Margie Adam discussed decisions to open some of her shows to men as a means of bringing the joys of women’s music to wider audiences. While she believed men could be a worthwhile audience members, she was more concerned with reaching those women who might not be inclined to go to a women-only show, particularly because of the understanding of women’s music as lesbian music. She found these concerts to be “heavier than shit” but found them to be an important and very welcome step.¹²⁸

Olivia’s final shining moment in the women’s movement came in 1982 when it celebrated ten years of making music with a concert at Carnegie Hall. The label made it to this anniversary by recognizing that it “had to adapt itself to difficult economic and political conditions.” This meant changes to “structure, personnel, and approaches” while working to maintain the commitment to speak “honestly and realistically about women’s lives.”¹²⁹ Its successes and survival were well worth celebrating: during its ten years the small lesbian feminist collective sold one million records. The Carnegie Hall show sold out immediately.¹³⁰ Two years in the making, the concert featured the movement’s most well-known and celebrated

¹²⁷ Hannah C. Goldman, “Why Invite Males?” *Plexus* 7, no. 2 (April 1980): 2.

¹²⁸ Donna Glickman, “Margie Adam,” *Plexus* 2, no. 11 (February 1976): 11.

¹²⁹ Sheri Maeda and Sarie Feld, “Olivia’s 10th,” *Off Our Backs* 13, no. 1 (January 1983): 25.

¹³⁰ Patrick Lettelier, “Judy Dlugacz: Olivia President and Founder Talks About Women’s Music, Lesbian Travel, Retirement Resorts and the Job of a Lifetime,” *Lesbian News* (January 2006), 22.

artists Meg Christian and Cris Williamson.¹³¹ The night of, “several thousand women spilled into Seventh Avenue, causing traffic to be re-routed and strolling New Yorkers to stop in their tracks” to witness the scene created by the excited throngs of woman-identified women. The show did not disappoint as it took the audience through the music that had been the soundtrack to the last decade of their lives. The spectacle of the night comes across in descriptions of wardrobe: “accompanists wore black satin tuxedo jackets with Olivia insignia in white. Meg and Cris began in hot pink satin tuxedo jackets.” Later in the evening they returned to the stage in black tails.¹³² While the retooling of Olivia business practices helped the collective get to this point, by 1982 found and longtime president Judy Dlugacz believed the company once again needed to be reinvented in order to survive. She explained that “the audience was starting to get older and we needed new talent.” While they tried to adjust, it continued to be an economic challenge and by the 15th anniversary “it was time to let it go.”¹³³

Olivia was the largest and most successful women’s record company in the nation. It “provided an opportunity for hundreds of musicians, technicians, producers, and publicists to learn and try out new skills, opportunities that have been denied them in the extremely male-controlled field of commercial music.”¹³⁴ It demonstrated that lesbianism could be celebrated in women’s culture through music. D.C. musician Jeanne Mackey explained, “I was very affected by a concert when I first came to D.C. in March, 1974 with Meg Christian, Casse Culver, and Willie Tyson, because I had never heard women being out front about their lesbianism when they

¹³¹ Sheri Maeda and Sarie Feld, “Interview: Olivia’s 10th,” *off our backs* 13, no. 1 (January 1983): 25.

¹³² Sarie Feld and Sheri Maeda, “Olivia’s Birthday at Carnegie Hall,” *off our backs* 13, no. 1 (January 1983): 25.

¹³³ Patrick Lettelier, “Judy Dlugacz: Olivia President and Founder Talks About Women’s Music, Lesbian Travel, Retirement Resorts and the Job of a Lifetime,” *Lesbian News* (January 2006): 23.

¹³⁴ Maida Tilchen, “Lesbians and Women’s Music,” 287.

were on stage.”¹³⁵ The work of Olivia artists showed women the joy to be found in this shared identity, in women’s relationships, and in loving women. For countless women, this meant the courage to embrace their sexuality and contribute to the remarkable growth of lesbian community in the 1970s. In 1988 as it was clear things were ending, an offhand comment, like that which sparked the original idea for Olivia, prompted its recreation. At an anniversary concert a woman remarked to Dlugacz that it would be great if the concert could have taken place at sea. Dlugacz found herself thinking “Vacations for women! I can do that!”¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Marlene Schmitz, “Jeanne Mackey and Mary Trevor,” *Off Our Backs* 5, no. 8 (September/October 1975): 12.

¹³⁶ Patrick Lettelier, “Judy Dlugacz: Olivia President and Founder Talks About Women’s Music, Lesbian Travel, Retirement Resorts and the Job of a Lifetime,” *Lesbian News* (January 2006).

Conclusion

Olivia's evolution speaks to the successes of lesbian feminism as well as the end of the woman-identified vision. The record label is now a travel agency offering lesbian-centered destination cruises. In much the same way that women's concerts and bookstores were respites from a homophobic society, these vacations are designed to help women "be out and feel free to be exactly who you are." According to Olivia, such experiences are "meaningful, profound and even life-changing." Their ability to serve over 200,000 women to date certainly has the lesbian feminist movement to thank.¹ The world of lesbian activism produced Olivia. It also created a world in which women can develop an understanding of their sexuality and where many feel safe and free to live openly as lesbians. At the same time, however, this is scarcely the future envisioned by woman-identified women, with lesbians continuing to need respites from a sexist and homophobic society. What, then of the woman-identified revolution? Did it end, as this dissertation does, in 1982? This year was a somewhat arbitrary though functional choice. It does not mark the death of lesbian feminism or an end to the passionate political work and cultural activity that began with the Daughters of Bilitis in the 1950s. As I discuss below, however, external pressures paired with the movement's internal successes and failures to demarcate a new era of gender and sexual politics. We are by no means living in a lesbian feminist utopia today but much of what lesbian feminism achieved was revolutionary.

¹ "The Olivia Experience," Olivia Cruises, <https://www.olivia.com/Travel/calendarcontent/whyolivia.aspx>. Accessed 7/18/2016.

In 1982 the women's movement experienced the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and the drastic dissipation of feminist energy that followed. As June 30th came and went the movement lost a central point of unity. Jeanne Cordova reflected, "what really killed the women's movement was the adoption of the ERA as a single focus [of the] movement.... When that finally didn't pass a lot of the core and the essence of that big wave dipped."² The ERA brought a good deal of energy into the women's movement but as with the suffrage campaign in the early twentieth-century, streamlining a movement to a single focus can lead to disorder once that focus has come to pass. The defeat demonstrated the increasingly mobilized conservative resistance feminists faced. What Phyllis began with Phyllis Schlafly's counter rally at the National Women's Conference in Houston became a significant force in raising concerns about enshrining women's equality in the constitution. Protecting the "traditional" American family from the ERA meant fighting the horrors of abortion, economic parity, and lesbianism.³ In some ways their mobilization, which highlighted the evils of lesbianism, validated feminist fears of the lavender menace. But it also validated the arguments lesbian feminists had been making since their earliest days. As long as "lesbian" could be used as a slur, the feminist revolution would remain unfinished.

Conservative women were not the only ones inspired by the events of Houston. The passage of the lesbian rights resolution demonstrated just how successful lesbians could be through a coordinated national campaign. Lesbian feminists considered how they might coordinate efforts state- and nation-wide to harness the power created through Lesbian Nation. In February 1978 forty six "Lesbian Feminists from all over the State of California" met in San Jose

² Jeanne Cordova, interview with the author, March 4, 2014.

³ Annelise Orleck, *Rethinking American women's Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 199-206.

to begin the process of creating the California Lesbian Feminist Federation. Initial goals included holding a statewide convention as well as raising funds to fight the anti-gay Briggs Initiative (discussed below).⁴ The following month close to 150 women came together in Sacramento to create the Women Fight Back Network to facilitate statewide organization as well as foster unity among groups that shared geographic districts.⁵ The largest effort at such mobilization was also located in California but it had a national focus. Los Angeles lesbians dreamt of the National Lesbian Feminist Organization (NLFO) and called a convening conference.

The project of NLFO spoke to what lesbian feminists had learned about inclusion from their years in the movement. The founding convention in March 1978 was hosted in Los Angeles with close to 150 women present. Addressing conversations around the movement's handling of race, the founders set specific requirements for racial composition. The first resolution they passed required "50% women of color in the planning and decision making groups of the organization."⁶ According to Yolanda Retter, this began with a white delegate asking "about the participation of women of color" given that most of them present were not voting delegates. They were "recruited as voting delegates" and the convention began with assuring the future of NLFO was an inclusive one. She called this a form of "unprecedented support" for "the lesbian of color agenda."⁷ California women were well represented in these initial discussions, given the meeting's location. But women from around the country participated and they voted by region,

⁴ "Lesbian Federation," *Plexus* 5, no. 2 (April 1978): 4.

⁵ Lee Mosswood, "New Network," *Plexus* 5, no. 2 (April 1978): 16.

⁶ "The Official Written Record of the Founding Convention of the National Lesbian Feminist Organization," National Lesbian Feminist Organization Records (Collection 1944), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

⁷ Yolanda Retter, "Lesbian Activism in Los Angeles, 1970-1979," *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*, Joseph A. Boone et. al., eds. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 210.

with the exception that the lesbian of color vote was counted separately. The participants set in place the components they believed necessary to get the group running until they could hold a national ratifying convention in the spring of 1979. Through 1978 and into 1979 NLFO activists produced a newsletter, started ten chapters around the country, and developed grand plans for how this body would grow.

But the NLFO project also indicated that the movement still had many problems yet to be resolved. When women of color present at the founding convention formed Lesbians of Color for “the empowerment of lesbians of color on personal and political levels” they indicated a lack of faith in NLFO to be such a space.⁸ Within NLFO, some women of color found themselves frustrated with the burden of educating white women. Michelle T. Clinton, selected to be the Affirmative Action Coordinator at the founding convention, resigned just two months later. While acknowledging that she was “pleased with NLFO’s commitment to opposing racism” she refused to spend her time “in a relentless struggle against racism for white women.”⁹ This divide was responsible in part for NLFO’s failures, as the organization struggled to achieve the 50% representation necessary. Other issues were also at play, however. Del Martin detailed the experience:

Conveners [sic] were attacked as elitist, and the delegates were hamstrung by concepts of stardom and what is politically correct and incorrect—concepts that stifle initiative and squelch leadership and action. The quantum leap from an inner-directed, quasi-separatist Lesbian culture to mainstream national political organization was apparently asking too much. Fear and distrust prevailed as the delegates struggled with issues of process, accountability, regionalism, representation of women of color, the pros and cons of a national network as opposed to an organizational structure, grass roots autonomy versus national spokespersons. After 2-1/2 days of agonizing the delegates finally declared

⁸ “Lesbians of Color,” Lesbians of Color Subject File, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

⁹ Michelle T. Clinton, “Letter to NLFO,” NLFO Lesbians of Color Caucus Folder, National Lesbian Feminist Organization Records (Collection 1944), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

themselves a founding convention for the National Lesbian Feminist Organization.... By then they had run out of time.¹⁰

Jeanne Cordova, one of the core organizers, believed it was important for lesbians to have their own national political body as they continued to be pulled “back and forth, between the other two movements.” She saw in its failure a number of issues, including the small size of the lesbian feminist world, the lack of women of color membership, and a centralized political focus in a movement so used to integrating social, cultural, and political activity.¹¹ They were discovering in this experience that the radical structure of woman-identified politics did not transfer well into traditional political structures. The pull Cordova mentioned was also one that proved difficult to ignore.

The final phase of lesbian feminism was marred by a reminder that lesbian feminist separatism did not safeguard gay women from attacks on the gay community. Anita Bryant demonstrated for lesbians that as much as they identified with the women’s movement they were very much affected by the mounting backlash against gay rights. In January 1977, Florida’s Dade County Commission passed an ordinance banning discrimination on the basis of “homosexual preferences.” Anita Bryant was nationally known as a singer and spokesperson for a number of companies, including the Florida Citrus Commission. She campaigned against the ordinance and when it passed she immediately pledged to overturn the outcome through the initiative and referendum process. To do so, she created and led Save Our Children. Playing on fears caused by long held associations between homosexuality and sexuality deviance, particularly ideas about gays as pedophiles, Bryant led the campaign to victory by a two to one margin. Through 1977 gays and lesbians around the country watched closely to see what would come to pass. It

¹⁰ Del Martin, untitled document, Box 40/23, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹¹ Jeanne Cordova, interview with the author, March 4, 2014.

garnered intense reaction since it was the first of its kind – a coordinate attack on the progress of the gay liberation movement. Some communities recognized it for what it was – the beginning of a new phase of antigay campaigns meant to stem the tide of gay visibility and activist accomplishments.¹²

Dade County inspired gay and antigay forces alike in California. The day after the vote, California state senator John Briggs announced his plans for an initiative that would prohibit anyone who engaged in same sex behaviors from working in schools. The Briggs Initiative (Proposition 6) would even prohibit public school employees from supporting gay rights. Just two days after Bryant's success longtime L.A. activist Morris Kight called together dozens of activists (mostly men) to form the Coalition for Human Rights so that they might “be ready for the Orange Juice Lady when she comes.”¹³ San Francisco activists joined their southern California friends in quickly forming new groups to combat Briggs. Divisions between gay men and lesbians as well as those between liberal and radical queers had to be addressed in this organizing and were not entirely mended through the battle to defeat Prop 6. Harvey Milk spearheaded San Franciscans Against Prop 6 in response to the milquetoast group Concerned Voters of California. He also reached out to lesbian feminists by arranging for Sally Gearhart to be his speaking partner throughout the campaign. Radical and lesbian groups insisted on maintaining their independence, however, and formed groups such as Bay Area Committee Against the Briggs Initiative and Lesbian School Workers. The various factions understood that

¹² Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 329-354.

¹³ Morris Kight, quoted in Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 366.

they had to work together, however. Statewide coordination through the umbrella No on 6 campaign proved key to successfully defeating Briggs.¹⁴

These attacks were a wakeup call that gay men and lesbians had to start investing more energy in national politics. Campaigns like the one gays and lesbians faced in Dade County popped up around the country. Also in the same year Florida succeeded in banning gay and lesbian adoption. In 1978 voters used referenda to overturn antidiscrimination laws in St. Paul-Minneapolis, Eugene, and Wichita. While Californians protected gay and lesbian educators in this year, Oklahoma passed a law allowing dismissal of anyone who promoted homosexuality. Historian Marc Stein characterized the nation as having reached a “political stalemate” with regards to gay and lesbian politics. While the public grew more likely to support “some degree of freedom and liberty in the private sphere,” they were not inclined to see them “treated equally in the public sphere.”¹⁵ Attacks on this scale increased the energy invested in national organizing among the gay community. The first national groups emerged earlier in the decade, such as the National Gay Task Force (NGTF), but they appeared with increased frequency and force in these last years of the 1970s. NGTF was joined by Gay Rights National Lobby in 1976, Gay Rights Advocates and Lesbian Rights Project in 1977, Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders in 1978, and Human Rights Campaign Fund in 1980. These groups shifted focus away from radical grassroots activism and the language of liberation, towards institutionalized advocacy reliant on minority rights messaging.¹⁶ This national shift was visible in other ways as well. First called for by Harvey Milk and inspired in part by his murder, the 1979 March on Washington brought over 100,000 activists to the nation’s capital. The ability to organize such a production, and the

¹⁴ Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 366-384.

¹⁵ Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 138-142.

¹⁶ Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 114-120.

recognition of need to do so among the community, was certainly supported by the rise of national organizations, even as a good portion of the community remained committed to grassroots organizing.¹⁷

Nationally and within the Bay Area, lesbians were not quick to join in coalition with gay men. The efforts put into groups like Lesbian Schoolworkers and NLFO demonstrate the ongoing effort to maintain lesbian separatism even as lesbians recognized that attacks on the gay community included them. While much of the lesbian feminist activity continued to exist within women-only spaces, there were those who worked alongside gay men, typically out of political necessity. In spite of being erased from the narrative, lesbians played a significant role in the mobilization that made Harvey Milk's 1977 campaign a successful one. But it was not an easy alliance and lesbians continued to find a community unwilling to open itself to feminist aspects of lesbian politics. The heated debates that occurred around filling Milk's vacant seat indicate how wide the divide between lesbians and gay men remained. The lesbian community supported (straight) feminist Kay Pachtner over gay man Harry Britt. Sally Gearhart, a close friend of Milk's, explained publically that Pachtner worked for both women's and gay interests, while she believed Britt had little interest in supporting women's issues. Britt was appointed to fill the position temporarily. In the ensuing campaign he ran opposed by Anne Kronenberg. When many lesbians, and indeed some gay men, organized in support of Kronenberg (*Lesbians and Gays with Kay*) they were accused of being divisive and dishonoring Milk by taking action that would do away with the newly earned "gay seat" on the Board of Supervisors.¹⁸

¹⁷ Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 409-414; Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 120-125.

¹⁸ Sally Gearhart, "An Open Letter to Voters in District 5 and San Francisco's Gay Community from Sally Gearhart," Box 26/15, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

It was ultimately the tragedy of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s that drew women back into coalition with their gay brothers. Many lesbian feminists quickly moved to translate their activist skills into support for gay men as they struggled to meet the needs of an ailing community with “an overwhelming sense of urgency and grief.”¹⁹ Some believed it to be the compassionate and common sense response. Others wondered whether it would soon be a crisis among lesbians. And still others understood that the societal backlash against the gay community in the wake of this new disease would not discriminate by gender.²⁰ A number of the women I interviewed held conflicted feelings about this period and what this shift meant for the live of the lesbian feminist movement. For some it meant gay male recognition, finally, of the importance of lesbians as allies in the movement. For others it was a disruption of a woman-centered movement by a group of people who never recognized the needs of gay women. Margie Adam opined that it drained “some very significant leadership within the feminist movement.... There’s no question that that really made a different in what was happening in the [lesbian] feminist movement at the time.”²¹

And so by the 1982 a confluence of events indicated that the specific dream of Lesbian Nation had come to pass. Yet the radical spirit of lesbian feminism lived on in a myriad of ways. Rural collectives offered a respite for those women who remained committed to a separatist lesbianism. A number of these communities still exist today in the far reaches of states as diverse

¹⁹ Annelise Orleck, *Rethinking American Women’s Activism*, 185.

²⁰ Josh Sides, *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 216-225; Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 54-155.

²¹ Margie Adam, interview with the author, February 28, 2014; Jeanne Cordova, interview with the author, March 4, 2014; Ellen Ullman, interview with the author, August 26, 2015.

as California and Georgia.²² The lesbian sex radicalism that became prominent in San Francisco in the 1980s in part grew out of lesbian feminism before the onset of the sex wars established rigid pro- and anti-sex lines.²³ Within the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) lesbians (some from the lesbian feminist years and still more coming of a new generation of activism) brought a feminist energy into the radical call to action urging the nation to recognize the disease was ravaging the gay community. The Lesbian Avengers formed in the early 1990s as a corrective to the glossing over of women's issues in the world of radical queer activism.²⁴ Finally, within organizations small and large, lesbians continued to push (straight) feminists to embrace sexual orientation (and sometimes gender identity too) as priority issues.

There is also the rich world of political and cultural activity that has been fostered by those women who built the lesbian feminist movement. They moved on to find a living wage and health insurance, to build careers and families. Some have lived on as grassroots icons while others respond with surprise when asked to share their stories of these years. Sampling just from those women interviewed for this project there are artists, authors, entrepreneurs, political candidates, musicians, separatists, and educators. They may not all be the upfront lesbian feminists they once were but they carry with them the spirit of those years. The woman-identified women of consciousness-raising groups, political organizations, and cultural centers made visible the possibility of lives lived differently. They may not have brought about a revolution in the scale of Lesbian Nation but they revolutionized a society that had been wholly resistant to recognizing that sometimes women loved women. In making this visible, in arguing

²² Sally Gearhart, interview with the author; Sarah Kershaw, "My Sister's Keeper," The New York Times online, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/01/fashion/01womyn.html>. Accessed 7/18/2016.

²³ Josh Sides, *Erotic City*, 216-225.

²⁴ Annelise Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 185-195.

that it was natural and even something to be celebrated, lesbian feminists brought about a multitude of personal revolutions. For countless women, they made it possible to exist as lesbians and pursue lives of openness, truth, and honesty. This is the spirit of lesbian feminism that continues on for so many. As Jeanne Cordova reflected, “Part of our wrap was, we could and should do anything we wanted to...it was constantly being in each other’s company [that] gave us the sense that we could succeed wherever we chose. That’s a nice thing.”²⁵ It has been so much more than nice for those of us who have benefited endlessly from this ethos and all lesbian feminists did to see it to fruition.

²⁵ Jeanne Cordova, interview with the author, March 4, 2014.

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