

**Making Space for Rural Lesbians:
Homosexuality and Rurality in British Columbia, 1950-1970s**

by

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Abstract

Rural areas are popularly perceived as conservative and hostile to difference, particularly that of sexual non-conformity. As the growing body of research on non-urban gay men shows, rural queer networks have been an historical reality. Shifting the focus onto gay women, this thesis is concerned with lesbians who lived rurally in British Columbia during a period of rapid urbanization in the province and the establishment of public lesbian bar cultures in cities across North America. Using oral history interviews with nine women who lived rurally from 1950 to 1980, this thesis contributes to the literature challenging the urban-rural divide and utilizes circulation to understand how queers have negotiated space. This work explores these lesbians' mobility and the ways in which they were integrated into their rural communities, as well as demonstrates the existence of rich lesbian cultures and communities during this era.

Keywords: Rural Homosexuality; British Columbia, 1950-1980; Lesbian Communities; Oral History

Subjects: Lesbians – British Columbia – History – 20th Century; Rural Lesbians – British Columbia – History – 20th Century; Lesbians – Canada; Country Life - Canada

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Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Rurality and (Re)Location.....	25
Chapter 2: ‘Too close to Be Separate’: Lesbians and Community.....	56
Conclusion.....	90
Bibliography.....	95
Primary Sources.....	95
Secondary Sources.....	96

Introduction

“Lesbians Are Everywhere!!” This slogan—popular with gay activists across North America during the 1980s—appeared in the July 1984 issue of *The Open Door*, a newsletter for “rural lesbians and their supporters,” published out of Terrace, British Columbia.¹ In exchange for a one dollar donation, the Northern Lesbian Collective offered to send anyone who was interested ten lesbian “calling cards.” They suggested individuals post these cards on bulletin boards, in bathroom stalls, “on counters, tape [them] to any number of fixed objects on the street, [or] on walls,” or that organizations could “stamp their name and phone number on the back” and pass the cards out in their communities to make contact with other lesbians.”² The creative use of this simple slogan demonstrates the innovative means by which rural lesbians have established contact with other gay women and how they created unique forms of community, as well as reinforces claim of the statement itself: lesbians are *everywhere*.

However, if lesbians are everywhere—as gay activists and lesbians in rural British Columbia declared more than twenty years ago—where are rural homosexuals in our historical accounts? This project addresses that question in the specific context of lesbian-identified women who lived rurally in British Columbia between 1950 and the end of the 1970s, while also engaging with the work of historians concerned with the relationship

¹“For the Quiet Radical,” *The Open Door*, July 1984, 16.

²“For the Quiet Radical,” 16.

between rurality and homosexuality.³ The popular assumption that rural spaces have been and continue to be inherently hostile and isolating places for gay men and lesbians was reflected in the initial literature produced on twentieth century North American homosexuality that was urban-dominant. More recently, however, a number of studies on the histories of gay people in non-metropolitan spaces have been produced. These studies are predominantly American and overwhelmingly focus on gay men. This trend makes the findings of this project aligned with work that pushes historians of rurality and homosexuality to continue to expand their geographical boundaries and to diversify the subjects of such histories to include women. The project's broader significance is in addition to the understanding of the specific experiences of rural British Columbian lesbians between 1950 and 1980 that it provides.

Reflecting on the relationship between lesbians and rurality, Angelia R. Wilson suggests that there is great significance in the lives of those gay women whose stories “call us to revisit our (mis)conception of country life as necessarily hostile or idyllic if only enjoyed in lesbian isolation.”⁴ The binary that Wilson identifies reduces the rural to either a romanticized ideal or a demonised wasteland and leaves little room to imagine, let alone consider, the lives of rural people who do not fit either extreme. The two conceptions of the rural as either a horrific backwater or an idyll are not limited to historical understandings

³While the historical work is the most directly pertinent to this project, the relative paucity of historical work on rural queers—particularly on non-urban gay women—means that it is crucial that the findings of other fields be used as a supplement. In her argument for using a “queer methodology” that includes myriad tools and drawing on multiple disciplines, theorist Judith Halberstam observes that “[s]ome of the most bitter and long-lasting disagreements within queer studies have been about disciplinarity and methodology.” She argues that this division has impeded work on subjects—such as rural queers—that have remained largely ignored by academia. *Female Masculinity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998),10.

⁴Angelia R. Wilson, “Getting Your Kicks on Route 66: Stories of Gay and Lesbian Life in Rural America, c.1950-1970s,” *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, ed. Richard Phillips, Diane Watt, and David Shuttleton (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 201.

of the relationship between rurality and homosexuality: they pervade popular discourses of rurality, be they specific to sexuality or about rural environments more generally.

The rural horror presents non-urban spaces as dangerous to anyone considered different, and as populated by an inherently more conservative and homophobic people who are “identified with the right and its racist, ethnocentric or nationalist ideologies.”⁵

According to Judith Halberstam, a consequence of these associations has been that, for many queer people, “lonely rural landscapes feel laden with menace” and non-urban spaces seem “populated by hostile populations.”⁶ This feeling has contributed to what she describes as “metronormativity,” which is a way of thinking that “reveals the conflation of ‘urban’ and ‘visible’ in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities.” In these narratives “closeted subjects ... ‘come out’ into an urban setting, which in turn, supposedly allows for the full expression of the sexual self in relation to a community of other gays/lesbians/queers.”⁷ As Canadian activist Lesley Marple explains, according to this perception of rural regions and populations,

[r]ural is the site of torture from which queers flee, and it is home to the less fortunate or disadvantaged queer. This view of rural queer then allows the urban to act as a missionary outside of the urban space. The rural area can be ‘colonized’ by the urban. The presumed superior ideas, tactics, and strategies of the urban queer experience are to be introduced to the backwaters of queendom and implemented to save the queer from the rural.⁸

The inverse of the rural horror is that of the rural idyll, which presents the countryside as a pastoral paradise. In this conception, rurality offers an escape from “many

⁵Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed, “Recognizing Rusticity: Identity and the Power of Place,” *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy*, ed. Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 29.

⁶Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Space: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), 22.

⁷Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Space*, 36.

⁸Lesley Marple, “Rural Queers? The Loss of the Rural in Queer,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 24, no. 2&3 (Winter/Spring 2005): 72.

of the oppressive aspects of contemporary urban life.”⁹ The rural idyll typically empties the country of its population and, instead, romanticizes notions of a vast and empty wilderness where ex-urbanites can live freer and more natural lives. When rural populations are included in this mythology, they are usually associated with, as Jo Little and Patricia Austin describe,

an uncomplicated, innocent, more genuine society in which ‘traditional values’ persist and lives are more real. Pastimes, friendships, family relations and even employment are seen as somehow more honest and authentic, unencumbered with the false and insincere trappings of city life or with their associated dubious values.¹⁰

These ideas also run through the discourse of lesbian separatists who constructed “the rural as an escape from the ‘man-made’ city,” a belief that utilized “stereotypical representations of the rural as a healthy, simple, peaceful, safe place to live.”¹¹ Popular during the 1970s and 1980s and strongly tied to lesbian feminism, lesbian separatism and the back-to-the-land movement proposed building women-only communities where lesbians could be sheltered from the sexism and heteronormativity of the dominant culture. Although these communities were occasionally forged in urban spaces, according to geographer Gill Valentine,

the aim of separatism was seen as best fulfilled in rural areas—because spatial isolation meant that it was easier for women to be self-sufficient and purer in their practices in the country than in the city, and because essentialist notions about women’s closeness to nature meant that the countryside was identified as a female space.¹²

As Angelia R. Wilson recalls of her experiences as a feminist and lesbian in the 1970s:

⁹David Bell and Gill Valentine, “Introduction: Orientations,” *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 8.

¹⁰Jo Little and Patricia Austin, “Women and the Rural Idyll,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 12, no. 2 (1996): 102.

¹¹Gill Valentine, “Making Space: Lesbian Separatist Communities in the United States,” *Contested Countrysides: Otherness, Marginalisation and Rurality*, ed. Paul Cloke and Jo Little (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 109.

¹²Valentine, “Making Space,” 111.

I heard my political sisters paint the pastoral countryside from a distinctively non-heterosexual perspective. In the separated rural space lesbians could commune with Mother Nature and rediscover the power of womanhood... Lesbian feminists encouraged women to “Find yourself in the country”—emphasizing self-discovery in the rural idyll, chosen isolation from the heterosexist world, creating a women-centred rural community.¹³

These anti-modern beliefs clearly draw on the same romanticized perceptions of the countryside as the rural idyll, while positing the occupation of non-urban spaces in more explicitly politicised terms.

Although the rural idyll and the rural horror are seemingly antithetical, they actually easily co-exist: while the rural horror focuses on the conservative and oppressive nature of rural populations, the rural idyll romanticizes a landscape typically emptied of people. It is here that we return to Wilson’s assertion that, in exploring rural lesbianism, we need to rethink rurality beyond the scope of either a hostile and inherently homophobic space or a romanticized ideal, only appealing when enjoyed through lesbian separatism. The dominance of these two popular discourses in contemporary, popular representations of rurality has made it a challenge to conceive of, theorize, or document the histories of queer people who individually chose to build their lives outside of the city, or who simply carried on living in the countryside in which they were raised.

Discussions of rural queers were limited to a similar binary in early historical narratives. While the history of modern sexuality generally—and the history of modern homosexuality more specifically—is now a mature and established field that continues to be pushed in new directions, it initially had a clear urban dominance. As historian Robert Aldrich points out, “Since the time of the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah and classical

¹³Wilson, “Getting Your Kicks on Route 66!” 200.

Athens...homosexuality has been associated with the city.”¹⁴ Indeed, the metropolises of the continent have been presented (and experienced) by many as meccas to which gay men and lesbians naturally want to relocate. Occasionally this was an overt assertion, but largely it was an implication of the numerous twentieth century North American gay histories that focussed on the establishment of urban-based public gay and lesbian communities and the gay liberation movement.¹⁵

Within lesbian history, the working-class urban bar cultures of the postwar era have received particular attention. One reason for this dominance is the comparative existence, maintenance, and accessibility of urban sources to rural ones. Urban gay and lesbian communities have had a level of visibility that has been accompanied by a production and preservation of archival materials. This is not to suggest that these histories were easy or straightforward to document, but rather to understand them as a logical starting point for early writings in the field. Elizabeth L. Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis’ exhaustive *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, which chronicles Buffalo’s lesbian community, is the most comprehensive of such studies, but numerous other cities have their own lesbian histories.¹⁶ While most of this work has looked at American cities, there are some significant Canadian contributions, including Elise Chenier’s study of Toronto’s bar culture, Line Chamberland’s

¹⁴Robert Aldrich, “Homosexuality and the City: An Historical Overview,” *Urban Studies*, 41, no. 9 (August 2004): 1719.

¹⁵This work includes, but is by no means limited to: Gary L. Atkins, *Gay Seattle: Stories of Exile and Belonging* (London: University of Washington Press, 2003); Nan Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A Queer History of San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); John D’Emilio, “Gay Politics and Community in San Francisco Since World War II,” *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990): 456-473; Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis, 1940-1996* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997); Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁶Elizabeth L. Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

work on Montreal, and the documentation of those cities as well as Vancouver in the National Film Board documentary, *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*.¹⁷ These works have significantly contributed to our understanding of the lesbian past, and their particular attention to working-class women marks an important divergence from the earlier histories of lesbianism that focussed on the lives of middle- and upper-class women.

However, the working-class butch-femme bar culture of urban centres across Canada and the United States has popularly become shorthand for *the* lesbian experience of the postwar years. Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* and Leila Rupp's *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America*—both overviews of same-sex sexuality over the past hundred years—are just two examples of texts in which bar culture is put forward as the defining characteristic of lesbianism from the late-1940s through to the mid-1960s.¹⁸ Faderman and Rupp's treatment of lesbian bar culture supports Sherrie A. Inness's contention that in the history of queer literature, the experiences of gay men and lesbians in a handful of urban centres have been "universalized, whereas the work of those concentrating on other locations is particularized."¹⁹ Bar culture was significant, but it was not a singular or universal experience. As Rochella Thrope and Katie Gilmartin have respectively shown, African American and middle-class lesbians established their own lesbian spaces and practices that

¹⁷ Elise Chenier, "Tough Ladies and Trouble Makers: Toronto's Public Lesbian Community, 1955-1965," (master's thesis, Queen's University, 1995); Line Chamberland, "Remembering Lesbian Bars: Montreal, 1955-75," *Re-Thinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, ed. Victoria Strong-Boag and Anita C. Fellman (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1997), 402-23; *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*, VHS, directed by Aerlyn Weissman and Lynne Fernie (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1992). Even Becki Ross's significant work on 1970s lesbian separatism, *The House that Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation*, deals with the unique case of the Toronto-based Lesbian Organization of Toronto (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. (New York: Penguin, 1992); Leila J. Rupp, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

¹⁹Sherrie A. Inness, "Lost in Space: Queer Geography and the Politics of Location," *Queer Cultures*, ed. Deborah Clarin, and Jennifer DiGrazia (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2004), 258.

existed outside of bar culture, although not entirely separately from it.²⁰ Given that lesbian bar culture does not comprehensively reflect urban lesbians' experiences, it can hardly be seen as representative of all lesbians' experiences during the postwar era.

This urban-dominance is not limited to the history of lesbian bar cultures, but was typical of much gay and lesbian history of the era. According to historian John Howard, "The history of gay people has often mirrored the history of the city."²¹ Some metropolises have played such dominant roles in the history of homosexuality that they have been imbued with the status of holy cities such as Zion or Mecca. San Francisco and New York have most often played this role, with lesbian historian Leila Rupp describing San Francisco as a "sort of gay haven in the postwar years."²² Even in the Canadian context, American cities have often filled the role of Zion: the west coast location of British Columbia, and the distance between the province and Toronto, has meant that for many Western queers, Seattle or San Francisco were more central sites. The draw of the City by the Bay was so strong that even "many Saskatoon gays and lesbians who could afford to travel visited San Francisco."²³ While Vancouver provided a localized urban draw, the smaller and younger nature of the city has meant that Toronto has typically played the part of a domestic queer Holy Land within Canada. Terry Goldie refers to the gay neighbourhood of Church and Wellesley in Toronto as a "refuge" and a "generic Canadian sacred site, like the Stonewall-

²⁰ Rochella Thorpe, "A House Where Queers Go: African-American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940-1975," *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 40-61; Katie Gilmartin, "'We Weren't Bar People': Middle Class Lesbian Identities and Cultural Spaces," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 1 (1996): 1-51. Though they receive particular attention in Thorpe and Gilmartin, an awareness of these divergences is also posited in histories of working-class lesbian bar cultures.

²¹John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 12.

²²Rupp, *Desired Past*, 147.

²³ Valerie Korinek, "'The Most Openly Gay Person For at Least a Thousand Miles': Doug Wilson and the Politicization of a Province, 1975-83," *The Canadian Historical Review* 84, no. 4 (December 2003): 544.

Christopher area of New York.”²⁴ While the economic opportunities of the metropolis are a nation-wide draw, Goldie argues that “[m]ore than other Canadians, the gay Canadian has treated Toronto as a mecca of opportunity.”²⁵

A consequence of the urban-bias and the mecca-fication of a few metropolises has been an obstructed view of gays and lesbians whose lives did not fit this pattern. John Howard contends that the histories of homosexuality have often been structured to mirror a coming-out narrative:

Persons of ambiguous sexuality, experiencing inchoate emotions (desire) out there in the hinterlands, move to the city for economic reasons. There they find themselves (identity) and each other (community). They become aware of their collective oppression and act to resist it (movement). This linear, modernist trajectory...proves highly descriptive of any number of lives over time, but it also effects a number of exclusions...What’s more, the pattern becomes self-perpetuating.²⁶

Howard acknowledges the very real draw of the city for many people, but remains critical of the elision of historical experiences that result from adhering to this narrative. His critiques are part of his response to the seemingly unquestioning acceptance by many historians of John D’Emilio’s hypothesis of the effects of industrialization and urbanization on homosexuals after World War II. D’Emilio, in his influential text, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” argued that homosexuality, as an identity, is not age-old, but rather a “product of history.” He saw modern homosexuality as intimately linked to the free labour system of capitalism, which allowed individuals to exist financially outside of the nuclear family, combined with the urbanization and demographic shifts spurred by World War II. According to D’Emilio, by the time of the 1969 Stonewall Riots, the communities of gay

²⁴Terry Goldie, “Queer Nation?” *In a Queer Country: Gay and Lesbian Studies in the Canadian Context*, ed. Terry Goldie (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001), 11.

²⁵Goldie, “Queer Nation?” 13.

²⁶Howard, *Men Like That*, 12.

men and lesbians in cities across the United States were established enough that a “massive, grass-roots liberation movement could form almost overnight.”²⁷ While there is truth to this historical interpretation, its widespread use as a lens through which to view all twentieth century queer history has tended to obstruct considerations of histories that do not fit within its confines.²⁸

In recent years the early of trends twentieth century gay and lesbian history have been expanded and rethought, and the scope of the field has been broadened to include suburban, small-town, and rural regions. Historians have begun to write the histories of men’s and, to a lesser extent, women’s lives that did not follow the rural-to-urban trajectory. The majority of this work has been American and focussed on gay men who lived either in the Southern or Midwestern United States. Works that include lesbians and focus on other regions represent a smaller, but growing, part of the field. Canadian historians of homosexuality have been studying the cities that have been overshadowed by Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, though a few scholars are concerned with decidedly more rural parts of the country. Beyond affirming the existence of gay men and lesbians outside of metropolitan centres, this body of literature does not have an overarching explanation, but it

²⁷John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” *The Gender/Sexuality Reader: Culture, History, Political Economy*, ed. Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 174.

²⁸D’Emilio’s work has also been critiqued for not accounting for the histories of gay and lesbian identities in pre-nineteenth-century native communities—identities that were not dependent on capitalism or changing familial structures—and for ignoring the gay and lesbian subculture of the Harlem Renaissance. See Dana R. Shugar, “To(o) Queer or Not? Queer Theory, Lesbian Community and the Functions of Sexual Identities,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 3, no.3 (1999): 17; Scott Bravmann, *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 12. Canadian historian Steven Maynard warns contemporary scholars to be cautious when criticizing the work of earlier historians of sexuality. With particular regard to D’Emilio’s work, Maynard reminds us that “Capitalism and Gay Identity” had been written twenty-five years before, when “essentialist notions of lesbian/gay identity were fully in the saddle,” making it “easy today to critique and find omissions.” While this sensitivity to context explains some of D’Emilio’s oversights, it is not an excuse for a continued acceptance of and reliance upon his thesis. “Respect Your Elders, Know Your Past: History and the Queer Theorists,” *Radical History Review*, 75 (1999): 60.

provides several tools and insights that are of value to all historians of homosexuality, not just those specifically concerned with rurality.

John Howard's *Men Like That: A Queer Southern History*, the anthologies *Out in the South* and *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, James T. Sears' *Lonely Hunters*, Daneel Buring's work on Memphis, and Michael Moon's research on Oklahoma explore the southern queer experience, a concept that has been perceived to be as great an oxymoron as "rural queers."²⁹ Although Angelia R. Wilson's article on rural American gay and lesbian life presents the broad strokes of national experiences between 1950 and the 1970s, much of the article is anecdotal and based on Wilson's own experiences as a lesbian in rural Texas during those years.³⁰ While much of this work has remained urban focussed, some of it has been concerned with developing ways of understanding a queer rural past. Wilson's suggestion that we need to free rural spaces from the horror/idyll binary represents an important step towards more nuanced histories of rurality and homosexuality. Howard's argument that circulation is a more inclusive way to understand how gay men have negotiated geography stands out as one of the most significant and transferable tools of this literature. A similar argument to Howard's is made by Peter Boag in his monograph *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest*, in which he documents the ease with which gay men in the Pacific Northwest at the turn of the twentieth century moved among

²⁹Howard, *Men Like That*; Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law, ed. *Out in the South* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); John Howard, ed. *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997); James T. Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997); Daneel Buring, "Gay Activism Behind the Magnolia Curtain: The Memphis Gay Coalition, 1979-1991," *Journal of Homosexuality* 32, no. 1 (1996): 113-135; Michael Moon, "Whose History? The Case of Oklahoma" *A Queer World: The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Martin Duberman (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), 24-34.

³⁰Wilson, "Getting Your Kicks on Route 66!"

rural sites, and between rural and urban locales.³¹ How circulation applies to lesbians, given the mobility restrictions often imposed on women, is a question that remains unexamined.

Boag's work can also be considered among those concerned with Northern and coastal regions in America. Anthropologists Esther Newton and Jerry Lee Kramer have also written works of historical significance to these regions, though their works deal with both gay men and lesbians in vastly different circumstances. Newton's exhaustive study of Cherry Grove, New York, from the 1930s through to 1980 chronicles the development of a renowned gay resort community to which New York's gay elite relocated when in need of relaxation. However, Kramer's work on rural North Dakota paints a contemporary picture of isolation and internalized homophobia that reaches back to the 1980s.³² Also focusing on the Midwest, activist-writer Will Fellow's oral history approach in *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* offers richly detailed narratives, but fails to develop an analysis or contextualize the accounts.³³ Most of these works, although limited in their direct applicability to Canadian contexts, represent an important step in the inclusion of region as a category of analysis in the history of sexuality.

Canadian queer historians have also begun to broaden their geographical scope. Cities like Kingston, Ontario, and St. John's, Newfoundland, while not rural or remote places, have often been overshadowed by the spectre of Canada's three largest cities and their addition to the literature does represent growth. Marney McDiarmid's MA thesis,

³¹Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003).

³²Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); Jerry Lee Kramer, "Bachelor Farmers and Spinsters: Gay and Lesbian Identities and Communities in Rural North Dakota," *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 200-213.

³³ Will Fellows, *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

“From Mouth to Mouth: An Oral History of Lesbians and Gays in Kingston from World War II to 1980,” offers the particularly valuable insight that while the city may lack the gay institutions of big cities, “gay men and lesbians have been ‘queer’ and ‘here’ for a long time, validating their lives through the construction of informal communities and networks of support.”³⁴ Sharon Dale Stone and the Women’s Survey Group’s work on St. John’s makes the significant argument that while many of the province’s lesbians have ended up in its capital, their reasons for moving often have little to do with sexuality and instead are frequently to attend university or find work.³⁵ Dealing with more explicitly rural areas is Michael Riordan’s sociological monograph, *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country*, which contains interviews with homosexuals across the country living outside of major urban centres.³⁶ Like Fellows, in his work on gay farmers, Riordan does not fit the interviews into an analytical framework, but rather leaves the interviewees’ words largely unanalysed. Still, *Out Our Way* offers glimpses of the experiences and beliefs of a wide array of gay men and lesbian from a diversity of rural spaces across Canada. More historically-based is the ongoing work of social historian Valerie Korinek on homosexuals in the Canadian prairies, including their rural experiences, in the second half of the twentieth century. In a recent article Korinek discusses the rural and urban regions of the prairies as connected by formal and informal coalitions and argues that gay and lesbian activists were able to use Saskatoon’s small town ethos to their advantage to create lobbying networks within a web of organizations including provincial unions, the NDP, the university, and social service agencies. It is a city in which alliances were and are

³⁴Mamey McDiarmid, “From Mouth to Mouth: An Oral History of Lesbians and Gays in Kingston from World War II to 1980,” (master’s thesis, Queen’s University, 1999), 4.

³⁵Sharon Dale Stone and the Women’s Survey Group, “Lesbian Life in a Small Centre: The Case of St John’s,” *Lesbians in Canada*, ed. Sharon Dale Stone (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990), 94-105.

³⁶ Michael Riordan, *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1996).

forged in the neighbourhoods, at popular cafes and bars, and via friendship networks.³⁷

The insights of these works, combined with those of the American sources, provide patterns to look for, tools to utilize, and questions to be considered.

A history of rural British Columbian lesbians presents the opportunity to consider existing findings in relation to a Canadian context, and to measure their applicability to lesbians. The challenges faced by lesbians as women, with less income and historically less freedom of movement than men, mean that the applicability of the tools used to understand the experiences of gay men must be investigated, not presumed. The specifics of a British Columbian context further serve to refine and expand not only the existing Canadian literature, but also rural homosexual history more broadly. In addition to the historical image of the province as a frontier, extending from the days of the gold rush, the coastal nature of British Columbia means the region has a diverse range of spaces, from port cities to islands. The numerous islands offer a particularly unique rural space; separated from the mainland and the general population by waters, the Gulf Islands are often mythologized as places of escape where alternative lives are possible. Islanders themselves have contributed to this mythology, as seen in one local historian's claim that, "[Islanders] accept eccentricity and tolerate strongly held and widely divergent beliefs."³⁸ However, the importance of rural imagery has not been limited to British Columbia's islands. Veronica Strong-Boag argues that even as the province's population became increasingly urban-based, "[T]he ranches,

³⁷Korinek, "Doug Wilson and the Politicization of a Province," 520.

³⁸Arthur Fielding Sweet, *Islands in Trust* (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan Books, 1988), 51.

mines, railroads, fishing and logging communities, and isolated farmsteads of the countryside have imprinted themselves, not only economically and socially, but imaginatively as well.”³⁹

The period between 1950 and 1980 is a rich context in which to examine lesbians’ lives, as the decades witnessed both postwar urbanization and the rise of lesbian feminism in the 1970s. The many significant societal changes that followed World War II included women’s increased freedom, rapid urbanization, and rising divorce rates. As the province’s demographics shifted from 47.2% of the population living rurally in 1951, to only 22% living outside of the cities by 1981, urban life became the norm and rural immigration bucked the trend.⁴⁰ Accompanying urbanization was the growing degree of independence that women enjoyed. After World War II, women began living away from home unsupervised before marriage, where they had previously been limited to boarding houses or schools. The apartment construction boom of the 1960s supported the development of this shift.⁴¹ This change can be seen as part of a larger trend of “unprecedented freedom—economic, social, and sexual—enjoyed by the generation of Canadians that came of age in the 1960s.”⁴² Divorce rates sharply increased after World War II, although this was not accompanied by any significant change in the popular representation of heterosexual, nuclear families as natural ideals: “The media did not question whether or not the normal and desired fate of

³⁹Veronica Strong-Boag, “Society in the Twentieth Century,” *The Pacific Province: A History of British Columbia*, ed. Hugh M. Johnston (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1996), 281.

⁴⁰Brett McGillivray, *Geography of British Columbia: People and Landscapes in Transition*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2005), 6.

⁴¹Alison Prentice et al, *Canadian Women: A History*, 2nd ed. (Scarborough: Nelson Thompson Learning, 1996) 379.

⁴²Prentice et al., *Canadian Women*, 380.

most women was marriage and motherhood.”⁴³ Remaining single received a minimal amount of media attention, and lesbianism was certainly not presented as an alternative.⁴⁴

The 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s were also times of great changes for gay Canadians. They saw both the homophobic hysteria of the Cold War era, which labelled homosexuals as national security threats and led to Royal Canadian Mounted Police surveillance and a civil-servant purge, as well as the birth of the gay liberation movement and the development of lesbian feminism.⁴⁵ Gay communities and activism were also taking shape, including the pivotal events of 1969 on both sides of the border. The Stonewall Riots were important to Canadians, but, as Valerie Korinek and others have pointed out, it was also a significant year domestically: “In Canada, 1969 was also the year of the Criminal Code amendments that decriminalized homosexuality and, famously, removed the state from the bedrooms of the nation.”⁴⁶

Very little has been written about the history of homosexuality in Vancouver or other parts of British Columbia, but what has been documented suggests an impressive degree of gay community identity and activism in the province. Although her MA thesis deals with women who constructed non-heterosexual identities outside of a bar culture in Vancouver between 1945 and 1969, Vanessa Cosco argues, “The femme and butch culture that characterized North American lesbian communities in this era was a pervasive feature of Vancouver’s public lesbian communities.”⁴⁷ Karen Duder contends that “[w]hile the ‘heyday

⁴³Prentice et al., *Canadian Women*, 383.

⁴⁴Prentice et al., *Canadian Women*, 384.

⁴⁵For a discussion of the RCMP’s anti-homosexual activities during the Cold War era see Gary Kinsman, “Character Weaknesses and Fruit Machines: Towards an Analysis of the Anti-Homosexual Security Campaign in the Canadian Civil Service,” *Labour* 35 (1995): 133-161.

⁴⁶Korinek, “Doug Wilson and the Politicization of a Province,” 522.

⁴⁷Vanessa Cosco, “‘Obviously then I’m Not Homosexual’: Lesbian Identities, Discretion, and Communities in Vancouver, 1945-1969,” (master’s thesis, University of British Columbia, August 1997), 44.

of these bars and clubs occurred in the late 1960s and the 1970s... the venues had catered to gays and lesbians before 1965.”⁴⁸ In his overview of the history of Canadian queer activism, Tom Warner notes that because they were women, lesbians typically had fewer options for public socializing than gay men. He recognizes the existence of the Vanport and a few other bars where lesbians were able to interact with one another in Vancouver, but he argues that few lesbians “had jobs that allowed them to live independently, or that enabled them to afford to go to bars.”⁴⁹

By the 1970s, second wave feminism was spreading across the country, accompanied by the development of lesbian feminism. In British Columbia, the women’s movement was “expanding exponentially” and in 1974 the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) was founded.⁵⁰ The BCFW was an umbrella organization for many of the province’s existing feminist organizations and it was intended to increase the political connections and power of these groups. Its development is significant not only to feminism, but also to the history of lesbian feminism in the province, as well as on a more national scale.⁵¹ The highly contested relationship between lesbianism and feminism could have been a source of deep division in the women’s movement in the province as it was in much of North America, but “out of it came what would become an important feminist element in British Columbia: lesbian

⁴⁸Karen Duder, “The Spreading Depths: Lesbian and Bisexual Women in English Canada, 1910-1965,” (PhD dissertation, University of Victoria, 2002), 376.

⁴⁹Tom Warner, *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 52.

⁵⁰M. Julia Creet, “A Test of Unity: Lesbian Visibility in the British Columbia Federation of Women,” *Lesbians in Canada*, ed. Sharon Dale Stone (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990), 185.

⁵¹Becki Ross explains that the BCFW served as the model for a (failed) attempt to build a coalition of feminist groups in Ontario. Ross, *House that Jill Built*, 249.

feminist praxis.”⁵² This praxis included the establishment of the BCFW’s Lesbian Caucus and the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee.

Almost nothing has been written about gay men or lesbians who lived in rural parts of the province during these decades. The scarcity of research gives disproportionate weight to what does exist. This allows assertions like that of Tom Warner—that homosexuals living in rural areas and small towns in British Columbia, like those across the country, “felt isolated and vulnerable, with no real sense of belonging to a community”—to stand unchallenged as representative depictions.⁵³ Warner’s assertions directly contradict the findings of my research, which documents the rich and diverse connections to community that rural lesbians had in British Columbia from 1950 to 1980. Stemming from an initial curiosity about the lives of lesbians living in communities without a bar culture, this thesis poses several questions: What forces compelled gay women to move to the country? Were rural lesbians aware of homosexual people in their childhoods? Were they connected to other rural lesbians as adults? How did they establish these relationships? What kinds of relationships did lesbians have to the local rural populations?

Over a period of twelve months (June 2006 through May 2007) I conducted oral history interviews with nine different women. The interviews, which were open-ended in nature, but followed similar lines of questions, ranged from an hour and a half to five hours long. One of the nine women requested and participated in a second interview after finding the time allotted for the first meeting to be insufficient. Six of the women were interviewed in person, while three of the interviews had to be conducted by telephone due to travel

⁵²Creet, “Test of Unity,” 183.

⁵³Warner, *Never Going Back*, 167.

constraints.⁵⁴ All of the women were offered audio copies of the interviews for their own records. While pseudonyms were offered to all of the women to alleviate any privacy or safety concerns, none of them chose to utilize the option and all consented to having their real first names used. The lone exception to this is Jane Rule, who consented to the use of her full name, as her public recognition affected her experiences and required explanation. A few details were removed or changed, including any name mentioned other than the interviewees' own, but these women were universally adamant about not having anything to hide. In fact, several of them were offended by the implication of shame that "anonymity" suggested to them.

The narrators were initially contacted in a variety of ways. Some of them responded to a request for interview participants that I sent out to numerous gay and lesbian organizations throughout the province. Others were referred by a woman whose own experiences did not fit the time frame of this project, but who was involved with the *Open Door* in the 1980s and thus connected to a northern British Columbia rural lesbian network. Three of the women were referred to me by people I had already interviewed. Despite the scepticism of many others about the existence of rural lesbians and my own initial concerns about making connections, there appear to be many overlapping networks of old dykes; with more time and resources, many more interviews would have been possible.⁵⁵ These nine interviews are not a representative sample, but that was never the intention of this project.

⁵⁴The in-person interviews include both of interviews with the narrator who requested a second meeting.

⁵⁵Lesbians over fifty are organizing themselves on local-, provincial-, and continent-wide basis. In 2005 Pat Hogan organized the first "Westcoast Gathering of Lesbians Over 50" in Vancouver. The event has since become annual and is now known as "BOLD: Bold, Old(er) Lesbians and Dykes Annual Westcoast Conference." On Vancouver Island, the Victoria Lesbian Seniors Care Society (VLSCS) serves as a community organization dedicated to supporting the social and physical needs of aging lesbians. In the United States, Older Lesbians Organizing for Change (OLOC) represents lesbians over the age of 60 fighting against ageism in all communities and its work includes recording the oral histories of dozens of lesbians over the age of 70 across North America.

Instead, they enter new voices into the lesbian historical discourse and suggest new ways of conceptualising lesbian lives and communities.

Although relevant textual material, including pieces from *The Body Politic* and the *Open Door* have been included, the interviews make up the bulk of primary sources of this project. Oral history is often seen as the solution to a history that has lacked more traditional, written sources. John Howard observes: “When you’re persecuted severely for homosexual desire, you’re unlikely to write about that desire in your journal or in your correspondence.”⁵⁶ Persecution—or the threat of it—has resulted in a dearth of more conventional sources, making oral history the most viable method of approaching lesbian history concerned with identity, community, and experience. Elizabeth L. Kennedy argues that,

Oral history has been central in creating knowledge about lesbian and gay male life before Stonewall. This is particularly true for working-class lesbians whose oppression as women and as lesbians, combined with race and class oppression has made it unlikely that they leave many written records.⁵⁷

The same could also be argued about rural queers; oral history has been the methodology of choice of Riordan, McDiarmid, Howard, Sears, and Kramer, among others.

However, the value of oral history extends further than as simply a means to fill in the gaps. As Joan Sangster argues:

We need to avoid the tendency, still evident in historical works, of treating oral history only as a panacea designed to fill in the blanks in women’s or traditional history, providing ‘more’ history, compensating where we have no other sources, or ‘better’ history, a ‘purer’ version of the past coming, unadulterated, from the very people who experienced it.⁵⁸

⁵⁶John Howard, “Introduction: Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South,” *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), 6.

⁵⁷Elizabeth L. Kennedy, “Telling Tales: Oral History and the Construction of pre-Stonewall Lesbian History,” *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 344.

⁵⁸Joan Sangster, “Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History,” *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 88.

Sangster is not denying that oral history allows us to ask questions of previously undocumented subjects, but instead is offering a warning that we must not ignore the role of the researcher and the effects of this approach, nor should we romanticize this type of research. Heeding this warning, I use oral history because it supports the types of questions in which social history engages, particularly how individuals understand their experiences. This does not mean that I expected the interviews to yield an immutable “truth,” but rather that they demonstrated the multiplicity of ways women experienced their sexuality and contribute to the ongoing expansion of historical understandings of lesbian identity.

Oral history raises a particular set of ethical questions for historians—questions that the work of feminist historians is particularly helpful in mitigating. First, it is important to recognize the power imbalance between the interviewer and interviewee. As Marney McDiarmid observes,

Inherent in any interview is an unequal power dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee. Although the interviewee is always in the position to decide which questions they want to answer and how they wish to respond, the interviewer is responsible for translating the oral testimony into a written document, and therefore, she retains ultimate control over the text.⁵⁹

Acknowledging oral history participants as “interpreters” simultaneously recognizes that their accounts are being filtered through various lenses and also allows for the researcher and the interpreters to disagree. Kennedy and Davis’ concept of “narrator” permits a similar accommodation.⁶⁰ With this in mind, these terms, along with interviewees will be used to refer to the nine oral history participants throughout this work. While ultimately this project presents my own analysis, one of the most important means of addressing the power imbalance was to make space for the voices and divergent opinions of the interpreters.

⁵⁹McDiarmid, “From Mouth to Mouth,” 33.

⁶⁰Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 16.

Further, the “open-ended” structure of the interviews presented the interpreters an opportunity to help shape the research by identifying the subjects they found most important.

The rejection of pseudonyms reflects one of the limitations of oral history: only those who have survived, who feel safe, and who believe their history is of value are motivated and willing to participate in an interview process. As Karen Duder observes, oral history only obtains testimonies

from those individuals who want to or believe that they should be interviewed for the project. Naturally, this degree of self-selection results in bias in the material favour of those who either have considered or constructed their narrative in formalized ways, have been interviewed previously, and/or who wish to situate themselves somehow in the broader framework of the interviewer’s project.⁶¹

This certainly reflects the experiences of many of the interpreters with whom I spoke; about half of them had been interviewed at least once before and were quite comfortable talking about their lives. Of the remaining women, some were pushed by partners to participate while others were quite eager to share their personal histories. What most narrators had in common was a generally positive outlook: they recounted hardships in the past, but they overwhelmingly stressed how happy they are now, and how they have lived fulfilling lives with few regrets.⁶² That these participants tended to emphasize overcoming hardships does not negate the value of their contributions, but it is important to remember that the greater likelihood of those who have overcome difficulties to be interested in sharing their stories has shaped the tone of the thesis.

⁶¹Duder, “Spreading Depths,” 27.

⁶²I spoke briefly with one woman who ultimately chose not to participate because she had put her difficult past behind her and was not interested in re-examining it. In addition, she did not consider herself to be an activist and participating in this project clearly crossed a line for her.

The diversity of the project was also limited in that the participants were all located on the southwest coast of British Columbia, in areas still relatively close to the city of Vancouver. My own Vancouver location and travel limitations played a major role in this geographical focus. The experiences of lesbians living in the interior and northern British Columbia are only represented anecdotally here, for interviewing those women would have required a separate and significant undertaking. The narrators are also all of Anglo or European heritage; a lack of racial diversity is a frequent problem in twentieth century North American lesbian history. One possible explanation for the racial homogeneity of this project is that greater urban racial diversity may have kept many non-white lesbians from relocating to the countryside, though methodological approaches may also have been at fault.

The life stories of the women who were interviewed represent a significant contribution to, and expansion of lesbian history, but it is crucial to remember that their stories do not represent the only—or even a unified—experience of rurality and female homosexuality. Like Kate Black and Marc A. Rhorer argue in their work on nine homosexuals in the Appalachian Mountains, even a small number can still offer insights and reveal important differences.⁶³ Indeed, the nine oral histories conducted for this thesis demonstrate some divergences from the existing narratives and show alternative possibilities.

The two chapters of this thesis engage with, respond to, revise, and complicate the assumptions of the rural-to-urban migration and quest for lesbian identity via lesbian community. Further, they present rich lesbian communities and networks that existed outside of metropolitan British Columbia between 1950 and the end of the 1970s. As is

⁶³Kate Black and Marc A. Rhorer, “Out in the Mountains: Exploring Lesbian and Gay Lives,” *Out in the South*, ed. Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 25.

discussed in Chapter One, the very definition of rural, and its relationship to urban is much more complex than is accounted for in existing scholarship. Moreover, these women's lives contribute to a troubling of a simple rural-to-urban trajectory and suggest different ways of thinking about lesbian geographies. Chapter Two outlines the various rural lesbian networks in which the narrators participated and reconsiders the relationship between lesbians and heterosexual members of rural areas. The narrators' lives, while in many ways very different, demonstrate the viability of a non-urban lesbian existence. During a period of time that saw rapid urbanization and the establishment of urban-based lesbian activism and public lesbian communities, these women either were not interested in relocating or moved in the opposite direction from the crowd, a decision which raises important questions about the primacy of sexual identity.

The significance of these women's histories is highlighted by writer Robin Metcalfe's reflections on the meaning of being gay in Halifax. Comparing the gay community to a nation that must lay claim to its own mythology in order to become real, Metcalfe writes, "Until we have imagined ourselves into our landscape, we do not really live there."⁶⁴ Along similar lines, Scott Bravmann argues, "Lesbian and gay historical self-representations—queer fictions of the past—help construct, maintain, and contest identities—queer fictions of the present."⁶⁵ These women's lives show that "lesbians are everywhere" is not an empty slogan, but instead the starting point of a rich and complex history.

⁶⁴Robin Metcalfe, "Halifax, Nova Scotia," *Hometowns: Gay Men Write About Where They Belong*, ed. John Preston (Cutton: Penguin Books, 1991), 314.

⁶⁵Bravmann, *Queer Fictions*, 4.

Chapter 1: Rurality and (Re)Location

Born between 1927 and 1953, the nine women whose recollections and insights inform this project are a diverse group. They come from different class backgrounds, have lived in a range of different places, and understand their sexuality in varying ways. Some of the women became political activists, while others resisted sexual conformity on a more personal level. Together, their lives expand our understanding of lesbian history and support flexible ways of thinking about the relationship between homosexuality and space. The narrators' lives demonstrate that the division between urban and rural is nebulous, that circulation is a useful way of understanding how lesbians negotiated geography, and that lesbians' reasons for relocating—or staying where they were—could have little to do with their sexuality. While their sexual identities are significant enough to each of them to motivate their participation in an oral history interview focusing on lesbianism, sexuality is just one part of their individual identities. Both their sexuality and their reasons for making personal geographic decisions must be seen within the context of their broader lives.

Mearnie is the oldest of the narrators. Born in 1927 in Vancouver, British Columbia, she lived a life filled with adventure. A life-long athlete, Mearnie played on basketball and baseball teams while attending the University of British Columbia (UBC). She took the 1950-51 academic year off from university to play as a catcher for the Chicago Bluebirds, a team in the National League of women's professional baseball. In the early 1950s, she was the first woman to buy property in Indian Arm, a community just north of Vancouver that was at that time only accessible by boat. While living there she continued to work in the city

as a dance and English teacher, first at UBC and, later, at Simon Fraser University. During this time she also continued to work in Vancouver as a professional square dance caller. At twenty-seven she was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a double-mastectomy, of which she now jokes, “I wished they’d done it earlier so I would have won the high jump.”⁶⁶ After sailing to the Marquesas Islands, just south of the equator in the Pacific Ocean, she returned to Indian Arm and continued teaching—although she switched to elementary education—until she retired at age 47 in 1974 and bought a store up the coast. In 1996 she sold her Indian Arm property and moved to Salt Spring Island with her partner. The couple, who married in 2003, celebrated their twentieth anniversary in 2006 with a huge party on the Island and are actively involved with Gays and Lesbians of Salt Spring Island (GLOSSI). Among the many things Mearnie now keeps busy with is teaching chainsaw lessons.

Jane Rule was born in New Jersey in 1931. Jane is the only one of the narrators for whom it was necessary to include a last name, as she is a well-known novelist and her experiences—especially those of community and privacy—are directly affected by the public nature of most of her life. Her father’s military career meant that Jane’s family moved frequently throughout her childhood. When she was 16 she started her undergraduate degree at Mills College in California. After doing a year of graduate work in England between 1952 and 1953, she moved to Massachusetts, where she taught at Concord Academy for two years. In 1956 she moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, to teach English at UBC. Helen, who became her life partner, soon joined her. While in Vancouver, Jane was active in both the arts and the feminist communities and was also busy writing novels. *Desert of the Heart*, her first novel, was published in 1964 and is now considered a classic lesbian love story. She continues to receive letters from readers thanking her for

⁶⁶Mearnie, interview by author, digital recording, Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, 5 June 2006.

writing a book that has helped make the world an easier place to live in as lesbians. In 1973 Jane and Helen bought a house on Galiano Island as a getaway property and in 1975, when Helen took a year's leave from work, they spent the year on the Island. In 1976 they moved permanently to Galiano, and, although Helen passed away 1999, Jane continues to live in that original house. During her time on the Island, Jane has opened up her swimming pool to the community and has given out many small business loans to help stimulate employment opportunities on Galiano. In addition to the novels that she wrote, Jane also published non-fiction articles in *The Ladder*, one of the first American lesbian publications, which ran from 1956 to 1972, and *The Body Politic*, a significant Canadian gay and lesbian magazine printed from 1971 to 1987. She is retired from writing now and illness confines her to her home, but she remains publicly outspoken on issues such as censorship and gay marriage.

Robbie's father was also in the military and her family was relocated many times during her childhood. Born in Winnipeg in 1937, Robbie did not stay in one place for more than a few years until 1953, when her father retired to Vancouver. After graduating high school she was accepted into the Vancouver General Hospital nursing program, but she decided not to attend after immensely enjoying her summer job with the city's Parks Board. She lived and worked in Vancouver for many years, continuing on with the Parks Board and socializing with the lesbians she met through her field hockey team. When her father unexpectedly passed away in 1970, she and her partner decided to move to Indian Arm, where Robbie stayed until the relationship ended in the late 1970s. Initially, after moving to Indian Arm, Robbie worked locally, doing a variety of jobs, including cleaning houses and driving the water taxi that transported the loggers to their camp and children to school. After her alcoholism led to the end of her relationship, she moved back to Vancouver and

returned to working for the Parks Board. Threatened with losing her job, she went to a rehabilitation centre, then joined Alcoholics Anonymous and quit drinking. In the decades since she became sober, her life has taken many different directions: she's worked as a real estate agent, built her own house, beaten cancer, and had a few long-term relationships. She is now happily retired on Gabriola Island with her partner, spending much of her time gardening. She stresses how lucky she has been in her lifetime, and her only regret is that she was never in a position to raise a child.

Born in 1938, Anne was raised on the outer-edge of Nanaimo, British Columbia, on Vancouver Island. Her father was a coal miner and her mother was a nurse. Anne's mother was a practicing Jehovah's Witness, but Anne rejected what she saw as a patriarchal religion. Her frustration with sexism carried into the rest of her life. She was especially frustrated by the limitations her gender placed on her employment opportunities, as she felt her choices as a woman did not extend beyond retail or the telephone company—the latter of which she briefly did. After completing a year of psychiatric nursing, she joined the Air Force in the hopes of getting alternate training and was stationed in various parts of Canada. However, when she was assigned work as a medical assistant, she felt like a “gerbil on a treadmill.”⁶⁷ She left the Air Force and returned to Nanaimo. Shortly thereafter, in 1959, faced with few alternatives, she got married. Before separating in 1976, Anne and her husband had three children together. While her marriage was ending, she began a successful career as a writer and after the divorce she began dating women. In 1982 she moved with her partner to a farm in Powell River, a remote community on the southwest coast of British Columbia, before relocating in 2003 to Tahsis, a small village on the west coast of Vancouver Island.

⁶⁷Anne, telephone interview by author, digital recording, Tahsis, Vancouver Island, British Columbia, 25 April 2007.

Staunchly outspoken and unapologetically blunt, Anne has participated in feminist activism for several decades, but is deeply critical of academic feminists. As she approaches seventy, she admits to being tired and believes that her job is now to “volunteer to look after the kids while the revolution happens all over again.”⁶⁸

Born in 1939 and raised in rural Shediac Cape, New Brunswick, Robin is now a retired lawyer who splits her time between Salt Spring Island and Ontario, where her partner teaches during the academic year. Her family’s hotel and restaurant financed annual winter escapes to Florida during her childhood. After completing an undergraduate degree at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Robin briefly returned home to run the family businesses before moving to New York for a year. In 1963 she relocated to Toronto to attend graduate and then law school. She fell in love with her housemate in Toronto, but ended up heartbroken and moved to Vancouver in 1971 to do her post-law school articling. Unhappy in Vancouver because of the sexism in her law firm, her stalled romantic life, and her general dissatisfaction with being a lawyer, she bought property on Salt Spring Island and moved there in 1972. She only did occasional legal work after this point, mainly supporting herself by renting out the house she owned in Vancouver, purchased with the inheritance she had received when her father passed away. She had difficulty finding a group of people with whom she was comfortable: she characterizes the lesbians she met while living in Vancouver as “down and out drunks” and found herself aligned with the hippies rather than the farmers on Salt Spring when she first moved there. Feminism was a revolutionary force in her life, not only connecting her to a community of women to whom she felt she could relate, but also opening her eyes to a way of understanding the previous challenges she had faced. While she has not lived an entirely closeted life, it was not until same-sex marriage

⁶⁸Anne, telephone interview by author, 25 April 2007.

was legalized that she felt comfortable and safe being consistently open about her sexual identity.

The youngest of the older group of narrators, Janet was born in 1941 in Calgary, Alberta. After her parents separated in 1946, she and her younger sister spent many years travelling back and forth between Calgary and their aunt and uncle's farm in eastern Saskatchewan. By the time she was nine in 1950, she and her sister were living full-time with their mother and the man who could become their stepfather on his homestead in Saskatchewan. Her memories from her time on those farms are clearly important and meaningful to her; in reference to youth, she says, "I would never trade that for anything in my life. It was such a wonderful childhood, and the memories that I have from that part of my life are just fantastic."⁶⁹ Her attachment to the farm is also evident when she describes her disappointment in having to relocate to Calgary in order to finish high school. In 1958, after finishing school, she got a job with a telephone company and through connections from her work and her baseball team she became active in Calgary's lesbian bar scene. Having worked a variety of jobs in Calgary, including photo finishing and taxi driving, she briefly moved with her partner to Fort McMurray, Alberta, in the spring of 1966. She and this same partner moved to Janet's grandfather's property on Qualicum Beach, Vancouver Island, in 1969. She initially worked in the kitchen at a fancy hotel in Parksville, but in 1972 she got a job working for BC Tel. That same year she bought property and built her own house with help from a few friends. Isolated and panicked by the end of her long-term relationship, in 1977 Janet placed a personal ad seeking a male partner, and by 1983 she was married and helping to raise her new husband's three children. She spent many years of the marriage involved in the Royal Canadian Air Cadets, a youth program affiliated with the

⁶⁹Janet, telephone interview by author, digital recording, Gabriola Island, British Columbia, 29 May 2007.

Canadian Forces. Though she characterizes the marriage—which ended in 1991 after her husband became physically abusive—as the greatest mistake of her life, she does not regret the time she invested in his children. After she got out of the marriage, she reconnected with a friend she knew from the Calgary lesbian bar scene and, through her, connected with a local lesbian community. She has now retired and lives on Gabriola Island with her partner; among the activities that keep her busy is her participation in a local lesbian choir.

There is an eleven-year gap between the births of Janet and Brook, who was born in 1952. She is the only narrator to ask for a second interview, an unsurprising request given the impressive level of detail she is able to recall when recounting her past. Brook attributes her detailed memory to the period in her life when she owned a used bookstore and spent a great deal of time talking about her life to her customers. She was born in Germany, but her mother brought Brook and her older brother to Canada in 1954 when Brook was just a few years old. They lived in Pioneer, British Columbia, until 1957, when they briefly relocated to Kitimat. During her youth she lived in Vancouver from 1958-60, Richmond from 1960 to 1961, Vancouver again from 1961 to 1967, outside of Hope (where her mother was renovating an old hydro crew camp into a motel) from 1967 to 1969, and, finally, Port Coquitlam until she finished high school in the spring of 1970. Although she was a part of a Vancouver lesbian bar scene from the time she was sixteen years old, she decided to move to Salt Spring Island in 1978 and has remained there ever since, referring to the Island as “paradise.” She has worked a variety of jobs, including as a chambermaid and then a letter carrier in Vancouver, and, when she first moved to the Island, construction. She keeps her distance from the lesbian community, in part because of the reminders it gives her of long-term partner who lost a battle to cancer in the mid-1990s. Although she describes herself as blunt and unwilling to “put up with bullshit from other people,” Brook is also sensitive and

incredibly self-reflective. Aside from some “affairs of the heart,” she has no regrets and does not “stop dreaming.”⁷⁰ She is currently turning her house into a lesbian bed and breakfast and, a lifelong athlete, spends much of her free time participating in disc golf tournaments.

Nym was also born in 1952, but in Vancouver. She was raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, by a mother who worked as a secretary and a father who was an English teacher and newspaper writer. Because of their own identity as leftists, Nym describes her parents as ideologically obligated to be supportive of her lesbianism. She returned to Vancouver to attend UBC in the late 1960s. After she became ill with mononucleosis, she missed a great deal of school and was only able to make it to her one evening class: Women’s Studies. Following this introduction to feminism, she left university and became involved with various local feminist activist groups. Her connection to feminism put her in touch with London’s Women’s Centre, which helped her find the women’s house where she resided for the year she lived in England in the early 1970s. It was during that year that she fell in love with—and had her heart broken by—a woman for the first time. She briefly returned to Winnipeg, but eventually came back to Vancouver and lived in a women’s collective house. In 1973 she took on a housesitting job on a local island. During the year she spent on Bowen Island she read all of the house owners’ organic gardening magazines, and she attributes the cultivation of her own attachment to gardening to this activity. Upon her return to Vancouver in the mid-1970s, she became involved with the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) and its Lesbian Caucus. At this same time, she and her then-partner decided to live rurally, first in Chilliwack and then establishing Amazon Acres, a women’s land space, on a farm just outside of Mission, British Columbia. Nym remained at

⁷⁰Brook, interview by author, digital recording, Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, 24 May 2007.

Amazon Acres, living without running water or electricity for most of the duration, until 1993, when she moved back to Vancouver. Considering her life retrospectively, Nym is proud of her activist work while acknowledging the degree of arrogance the lesbian feminists of her generation held.

Yvette was also incredibly active in the BCFW and its Lesbian Caucus. She was born in Saskatoon in 1953 and, because her father was a carpenter, her family relocated many times during her childhood as they followed his work opportunities. They moved first to Outlook and then Eston, both in Saskatchewan, lived in a boxcar on the Canadian National Railway lines, and finally settled in St. Lazare, a small community on Manitoba's border with Saskatchewan. The oldest of eight siblings, including two sisters who are also lesbians, Yvette left home after high school to train to be a psychiatric nurse in Brandon, Manitoba. After becoming pregnant and giving the child up for adoption, Yvette felt lost and unsupported and decided to hitchhike to Vancouver. In the early 1970s, shortly after moving to British Columbia, she was introduced to lesbian feminism. She became active in the BCFW and got a job at the Vancouver Rape Relief Crisis Centre. She spent her spare time travelling the province on BCFW business or at Amazon Acres. When she left Vancouver in the early 1980s, it was to follow a woman she loved to Toronto, the city where Yvette remains to this day. She describes herself as “a prairie kid who’s just waiting to get back,” living in Toronto in order to do the type of work she finds meaningful.⁷¹ The work that she has dedicated herself to for the past twenty years is that of AIDS bereavement support—an appropriate choice given her self-proclaimed “nurse’s heart” and her kind demeanour. Yvette says that her “obligation is to follow love,” but she also thinks that two people are never enough and, as such, she has been committed to pro-actively building

⁷¹Yvette, interview by author, digital recording, Toronto, Ontario, 18 May 2007.

community, first in British Columbia, and now in Ontario. This ongoing commitment is evident in her plans for the future: “I’ve got to get on with building old queer community here so we have an old folks home...I’m going to start looking at geriatric queers and what we’re going to do...[and] how we’re going to take care of each other, because if I don’t do that, then what have I done?”⁷²

As these brief introductions to the narrators make clear, these women’s lives do not easily fit into urban migration narratives. In fact, their patterns of movement undermine a rural-urban binary. Circulation is a more applicable tool for understanding their geographical histories. In fact, for some of the narrators, the act of relocation, regardless of the type of destination, played an integral role in facilitating the establishment of a lesbian identity. For several others, however, the decision to live rurally had little or nothing to do with sexuality. Given the urbanization of British Columbia, the development of public urban lesbian communities in the 1950s and 1960s, and the urban-based lesbian feminism of the 1970s, the decision to remain in or relocate to a rural area undermines the primacy of sexuality identities in the process of deciding where to build one’s life.

A consideration of geographic life choices reveals that, despite the binary opposition of rural and urban, “rural” is actually a fairly slippery concept. The observations of individual narrators suggest a mutable definition of rurality. Many of them lived in spaces that fell somewhere in between the city and the country. Robin, in describing the small community where she grew up in the 1940s in New Brunswick, is quick to clarify that “[i]t wasn’t an isolated little cove like you find in Newfoundland. It wasn’t that isolated and ingrown. But it was pretty tight.”⁷³ Her comments indicate that, to her, isolation played a

⁷²Yvette, interview by author, 18 May 2007.

⁷³Robin, interview by author, digital recording, Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, 4 June 2006.

greater role than population in defining “rural.” This is a sentiment that she reiterated when talking about lesbians she knew on Denman Island and Courtenay who organized a women’s festival she attended in the 1970s: “Now, those were really rural women. Because they didn’t have the kind of contacts that I had back and forth between Vancouver and here [Salt Spring Island].”⁷⁴ Brook added further complexity to conceptualising “rural” by observing how the process of urbanization over time means that regions we currently think of as urban could easily have been much more “rural” thirty or forty years ago. Although Richmond is currently a densely populated, urbanized part of the Great Vancouver Regional District (GVRD), when Brook lived there in the late 1950s and early 1960s she considered it very rural: “There were farms butted right up two properties away from where we lived. It was all very farm-like. And there were still the original canneries and Japanese communities down on the Fraser River. And dirt roads. We spent a lot of time out on the dikes.”⁷⁵ She also suggested that even Vancouver was “pretty rural” when her family first moved there in the mid-1950s, even though its population was over half a million.⁷⁶

These women understood rurality in different ways, reflecting the argument put forth by Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed, the editors of *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy*: “Almost any place can be experienced as either rural or urban. Memphis, for example, looms in the Faulkerian imagination as *the* metropolis, yet a Parisian we know experienced life in Memphis as a painful rustication.”⁷⁷ Rurality, for the purposes of this discussion, must maintain a flexible definition that allows the narrators to self-identify

⁷⁴Robin, interview by author, 4 June 2006.

⁷⁵Brook, interview by author, digital recording, Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, 1 December 2006.

⁷⁶Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

⁷⁷Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed, “Recognizing Rusticity: Identity and the Power of Place,” *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy*, ed. Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 13.

their experiences or themselves as rural. Given the narrators' wide-ranging definitions and experiences of rurality, there is more value in exploring their understandings of rurality than in imposing a standardized definition.

The value of conceiving of rurality as an adaptable and varying concept is reinforced by the narrators' emphasis on the importance of discussing the in-between spaces or grey areas that did not obviously fit into even an expanded definition of rurality. Anne characterizes Harewood—the Vancouver Island community where she grew up in the 1930s and 1940s—as “semi-rural.” A half-hour's walk from downtown Nanaimo, it still had a few farms, and the “houses were on much bigger lots than in the city.”⁷⁸ As Brook noted during our interview, “We've been talking a lot about the country—the country or the wilderness or the land as opposed to the city. And then there are places in between, that are sort of borderline.”⁷⁹ With rurality seemingly so difficult to pin down, and many spaces not easily quantifiable as urban or rural, it is difficult to sustain the pilgrimage to the city as an archetype.

Narrators also revealed the nuances involved in determining whether an individual could be considered a rural woman, an identification that involved more than just one's location. For Yvette, the way in which people use space contributes to their characterization as rural or urban. She knew a group of Montreal upper-class lesbians who moved to the country to form artist colonies and who lived in chalets because their money enabled them to do so. She describes them as knowing nothing of gardening and treating the country as a retreat. Yvette declares, “I would never say that they were rural women.”⁸⁰ Although she concedes that spending time in the countryside for over twenty years might eventually

⁷⁸Anne, telephone interview by author, 25 April 2007.

⁷⁹Brook, interview by author, 24 May 2007.

⁸⁰Yvette, interview by author, 18 May 2007.

change a person, Yvette observes, “Initially I would read them as women with privilege who bought a country house, and that’s different than women who lived off the land, or got off the grid, or had an investment in building a community of people outside of Nelson, BC.”⁸¹

For Brook, rurality was akin to a state of mind: “Our friends from the city really were city people and we really were country women even though we came from the city. That difference of – you could almost call it values, but it’s not that. It’s almost like a flavour of life, what gives you your biggest high.”⁸² To claim a rural identity regardless of one’s location was a contested issue for British Columbian lesbians. A debate on the issue appeared in the pages of *The Open Door* in 1985 when Yvonne Johnson, a long-time rurally-located lesbian whose medical condition forced her to move San Francisco, wrote, “I do not believe that it is enough to ‘feel’ rural or to have been rural once, or to plan to be so again. It is not enough to not partake of the advantages of city life if they are within reach. This is an important difference. Access to privilege makes a difference even if it is not acted on.”⁸³ A letter to the editor appeared in the following issue, challenging Johnson’s assertion. Madeline Gemmill, who lived in San Francisco after having spent ten years in the North Okanagan, wrote that access to the benefits of urbanism “simply affirms most positively your lesbianism, it doesn’t negate your rurality...in spite of wonderful access to privilege, to power, to support, I am still one and the same—a woman who loves the land, the beings, plants and earth that are part of me—a rural lesbian.”⁸⁴ Given the difficulty in finding a consensus on the definition of “lesbian,” that there was debate over who qualified as a *rural* lesbian is hardly surprising.

⁸¹Yvette, interview by author, 18 May 2007.

⁸²Brook, interview by author, 24 May 2007.

⁸³Yvonne Johnson, “City/Country Conflict,” *The Open Door*, Jan 1985, 3.

⁸⁴Madeline Gemmill, “Letter to the Editor,” *The Open Door*, Spring 1985, 2.

British Columbia's Gulf Islands, where several of these women lived and continue to reside, also challenge characterizations of non-urban spaces as inherently conservative places. While the Islands have small populations, they also have relatively easy ferry access to Vancouver or Victoria. Further, the Islands have a reputation as places of "escape" to which people seeking alternative communities, such as artists, hippies, and war resisters, would relocate. Salt Spring Island, in particular, is known for being a refuge from mainstream society. American men, women, and families protesting the Vietnam War or evading the draft were one of the prominent groups of immigrants to Salt Spring during the 1960s.⁸⁵ In addition to these alternative populations, the Gulf Islands are also known for having large lesbian populations.

A great deal of lesbian theory and imagery draws on the mythology of Sappho and the Isle of Lesbos to suggest an inherent connection between lesbians and islands. In one of the articles in the *Lesbians in Canada* anthology Micheline Grimard-Leduc claims, "This simple word 'lesbian' brings forth the vision of the island," and that the refuge of lesbians "has most often taken the shape of an island. The flight to the island is a symptom of uneasiness, a sane reaction to the restlessness caused by a destructive social environment."⁸⁶ While this mythology perpetuates problematic assumptions about innate lesbian identities, there are examples of homosexuals creating space for themselves on islands. Anthropologist Esther Newton has documented the sixty-year history of Cherry Grove, Fire Island, a gay resort community. She describes it as a place where "gay people escape from straight

⁸⁵Charles Kahn, *Salt Spring: The Story of an Island* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1998), 278.

⁸⁶Micheline Grimard-Leduc, "The Mind-Drifting Islands," *Lesbians in Canada*, ed. Sharon Dale Stone (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990), 178, 174. It should be noted that the romanticization of islands is not entirely unique to lesbians. In an anthology about the 400 islands on British Columbia's coast, Arthur Fielding Sweet claims that, "There is a mystic affinity between mankind and the sea, an affinity that stretches far back to the grey beginnings of life on Earth." *Islands in Trust* (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan Books, 1988), 22.

domination to become for a space of time what so many long to be—themselves.”⁸⁷ This description draws on notions similar to the rural idyll. The island refuge mythology can also be seen in the decision of the Vancouver members of the Association of Social Knowledge (ASK) to hold their first annual picnic in 1967 on “a lovely little island in Harrison Lake, occupied solely by ASK, and dubbed ‘ASK Island.’”⁸⁸ Islands have been seen as places of escape by many groups and there is historical evidence that lesbians have availed themselves of them, but it is dangerous to suggest that lesbians have an innate or natural connection to islands.

In a sense, islands fall into the grey area somewhere between rural and urban. As Ching and Creed argue, “‘purely rural’ or ‘purely urban’ spaces make up only a portion of the various places in which people live and form their identities. In developed countries in particular, cities merge into megalopolises which in turn bleed into the countryside through rings of suburbs and exurbs.”⁸⁹ They also observe how individual context and background play a significant role in shaping one’s definition of rural, a sentiment that is echoed by an anecdote in Michael Riordan’s *Out Our Way*: “A lesbian from a Newfoundland outport calls Cornerbrook [sic] ‘the city’—it’s got a mall. Her partner laughs; she grew up in Chicago.”⁹⁰ Riordan settled on a fairly broad definition of rural as meaning “not-the-big-city...places where we lack the critical mass of our urban cousins, where we have to do things differently.”⁹¹

⁸⁷Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 2.

⁸⁸“ASK Island Picnic Report,” *ASK Newsletter*, September 1967, 3.

⁸⁹Ching and Creed, “Recognizing Rusticity,” 15.

⁹⁰Michael Riordan, *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1996), xii.

⁹¹Riordan, *Out Our Way*, xii.

Contributing further to the complex relationships that people had to rural spaces are the different experiences and conceptions of rurality people who migrate from urban centres to rural areas had both amongst themselves and from people who grew up in the country. As Ching and Creed remind us, “*Going* to the country with a fully formed urban identity is not the same as *being* from the country.”⁹² In fact, the lesbian separatist back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s demonstrates this difference. The women’s land movement reflects an inverted representation of the rural in which it is no longer the horror from which queers must flee, but rather the ideal in which lesbians will find relief from an urban, heterosexist world. Geographer Jo Little argues that the intent of lesbian separatist communities located in rural spaces was to allow lesbians “to distance themselves from mainstream society and establish ‘ideal’ communities away from the influence of men and from patriarchal social relations.”⁹³

The “green utopianism” of lesbian separatism posits the rural as offering “freedom from many of the undesirable sides of modern life.”⁹⁴ The rural idyll is contingent upon the construction of *new* communities within rural spaces. The rural idyll and the rural horror are able to co-exist because, as Ching and Creed argue, “The ideal country is the place urbanites visit, not the place where poor people eke out a living. Urban dwellers who are free from the stigma of rusticity can wax eloquently about the countryside or embrace it as a retreat without undermining their own cultural superiority.”⁹⁵ This criticism is complicated by the presumption that many urban homosexuals were themselves rural refugees, so their

⁹²Ching and Creed, “Recognizing Rusticity,” 20.

⁹³Jo Little, “Gender, Sexuality and Rurality,” in *Gender and Rural Geography: Identity, Sexuality and Power in the Countryside* (Harlow and New York: Prentice Hall, 2002), 173.

⁹⁴David Bell and Gill Valentine, “Queer Country: Rural Lesbian and Gay Lives,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 11, no. 2 (1995): 118.

⁹⁵Ching and Creed, “Recognizing Rusticity,” 20.

relationship to the rural was not straightforward, but it does speak to the different ways in which rurality is deployed.

These ideals clearly held sway for several of the women I spoke with, many of whom admitted to having initially romanticized living rurally to some degree. Reflecting on the ideals and intentions of many of the women connected to Amazon Acres, Nym acknowledges that,

There was a lot of mythologizing and romanticizing about women's land and about how important it was that lesbians had a place to go where they could be free of the constraining influences of patriarchal society and about how women in the city should have some place to go where they could connect with nature, etc. But more it was about getting away from the societal influences of patriarchy...I remember as we lived in the country over a longer period of time how irritated we would get with the romanticization of the rural life. Even though we might have started there ourselves, we fairly quickly got really irked by this complete unawareness of the hard physical work it was, and the challenges of making a life that was land-based.⁹⁶

Nym's recollection supports Yvette's assertion that spending enough time in the country had the potential to change one's conception of and existence in rural spaces.

The romantic ideals could be difficult to evade. Even Brook, who lived rurally for much of her youth, characterizes her and her partner's decision to move to Salt Spring Island in 1978 as their desire to be "back-to-the-landers," although, looking back, she laughingly wonders how "we thought we were going to live off an acre."⁹⁷ Remembering their initial attitudes when they moved to Salt Spring, Brook recalls, "We were anarchists, we thought. We just didn't want to pay taxes and we wanted to 'Get them off our tits!' And own our own land and god knows what. But, we were so young. I can't believe some of the ideas that we had back then. We were so idealistic."⁹⁸ Though she admits to idealizing Helen and Scott Nearing, the public faces of the broader back-to-the-land movement, she points out

⁹⁶Nym, interview by author, digital recording, Vancouver, British Columbia, 28 March 2007.

⁹⁷Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

⁹⁸Brook, interview by author, 24 May 2007.

that after she moved to the Island, she came to understand how much assistance was needed to live off the land. Whatever tinge of romantic idealism regarding rurality shaped Brook and her partner's worldview, Brook is clear that they "weren't trying to get away from heterosexist society. Actually, we were more trying to change it than get away from it."⁹⁹ Particularly interesting are Anne's comments, for even though she is adamant that she had no involvement with the lesbian back-to-the-land movement—"because that was a waste of time, darlin.' I was too busy feeding three kids to have any time to waste on that"—she still hints at a degree of romanticism, stating that homosexuality and living rurally are "both a more natural way to be."¹⁰⁰ While romanticism may have pervaded some of the popular discourses of the time and traces of it are evident in some of these women's narratives, it played a very limited role in their lives.

As is evident in their brief biographies at the beginning of this chapter, the lives of the narrators not only complicate straightforward definitions of "rural," but they also—perhaps as a direct consequence—do not fit an urban migration model. In fact, their lives are better understood through John Howard's conceptualization of circulation. In his groundbreaking study of queer men in Mississippi from 1945 to 1985, Howard offers alternative ways to conceptualize queer existence and queer space. One of the most useful tools that Howard provides is that of circulation as opposed to "congregation." Howard argues

for an understanding of urban centers not only as centripetal, but also as centrifugal forces—locations from which emanate any number of forays and journeys, many of which are short term, leading to a variety of opportunities for encounters,

⁹⁹Brook, interview by author, 24 May 2007.

¹⁰⁰Anne, telephone interview by author, 25 April 2007.

meetings, and rendezvous. Of course, such spatial movements and interpersonal connections need never involve cities at all.¹⁰¹

Instead of documenting a grand exodus from the countryside into the city, Howard argues that men were enacting homosexual behaviours and identities throughout rural Mississippi's homes, churches, schools, and cars. Peter Boag makes a similar argument in *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest*, which covers an earlier time period and includes British Columbia. Boag recounts the ways "homosexual practices pervaded transient society. Migrating men and youths constructed an elaborate same-sex sexual culture that was anything but anonymous or furtive."¹⁰² The transient nature of work in the hinterlands of the Pacific Northwest meant that rather than men needing to go to the city to find sexual partners, new sexual contacts were continually moving through rural areas: "[M]en found that the hinterland itself was a sexual space."¹⁰³ Although their research deals with male sexuality, Howard and Boag's work offer alternative approaches to conceptualizing queer rural histories that are particularly useful to understanding the lives of rural lesbians in British Columbia.

Not only did the narrators move in a variety of different ways—such as urban to rural, rural to urban, rural to urban to rural, and rural to rural—but most of them maintained close connections to the city and visited regularly while living rurally. For example, both Robin and Jane maintained residences in Vancouver when they first relocated to the Gulf Islands in 1972 and 1975, respectively. From 1967 to 1969 Brook, then a teenager, lived about thirty miles outside of Hope, a small community two hours east of Vancouver. She

¹⁰¹John Howard, *Men Like That: A Queer Southern History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 14.

¹⁰²Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 39.

¹⁰³Boag, *Same Sex Affairs*, 41.

hitchhiked into the city regularly to go to the Vanport, a notorious lesbian bar. This urban connection was so important to her that occasionally she slept in Stanley Park when she had nowhere to stay. Even after she settled on Salt Spring Island in 1978, she continued to spend time in Vancouver, due largely to her connection to the Women and Trades Association. Mearnie, although she was not active in the bar scene, had deep ties to various sports teams and maintained regular contact with women in Vancouver after moving to Indian Arm, even while it was only accessible by boat. Despite the difficult commute, Mearnie recalls: "I was a very active person, so even on my Sundays, I would go into Vancouver to coach and come back later."¹⁰⁴ Although she initially found local work, Robbie, who also lived in Indian Arm during the 1970s, eventually commuted into Vancouver for work.

This migration also worked in the other direction, with interpreters such as Nym and Yvette continuing to visit rural places while living in Vancouver. Nym, having discovered a love of and connection to country living while house-sitting on Bowen Island, moved to a cabin on a mountain outside of Chilliwack with her partner in the early 1970s. She and her partner were both heavily involved with lesbian feminist activism in the province and maintained an ongoing presence in Vancouver. In the mid-1970s they, along with a friend, invested in ten acres of land just outside of Mission, British Columbia. The property came to be known as Amazon Acres and served as a gathering place for lesbians in the Lower Mainland. When Nym and her partner's relationship ended, Nym moved back to Vancouver, but only after she and her ex-partner "fought viciously about who was going to get the farm, because we were both attached to it. I left, not because I wanted to, but because I couldn't make her leave. She was more stubborn than me...I didn't want to give

¹⁰⁴Mearnie, interview by author, 5 June 2006.

up my connection to that piece of property at all.”¹⁰⁵ In 1978 Nym was able to buy-out her ex-partner, who decided to relocate to the interior, but during the years that she lived in Vancouver, Nym continued to return to the land several times a year to garden. She was adamant that she “was not willing to let go of it.”¹⁰⁶

Yvette’s experiences pose an interesting contrast to Nym’s, as the entire time that she lived in British Columbia, she resided in Vancouver. When asked why she stayed in Vancouver, Yvette explains:

I was never home. I had a job working in BC setting up rape crisis centres, and then I had the other stuff with the BC Federation of Women, and then I would be at [my friends’] place, that’s where I went. I was basically there to change my clothes and brush my teeth and leave. I didn’t have a sense that I was going to stay in BC, so that was what I did. And how I survived in Vancouver was to be out.¹⁰⁷

As two women who spent large parts of the ‘50s, ‘60s, and ‘70s living in cities, Nym and Yvette were still able to maintain a connection to and presence in rural spaces and made quite an effort to do so.

Janet, once settled rurally, did not make attempts or desire to spend time in the city. While all of the women found value and enjoyment in living rurally, most of them also had positive memories of the time they spent living in cities. Even Anne—who is adamant about her total disinterest in living in an urban space—concedes, “Had God decided that I had to live in Toronto and that’s all there was, I think I probably could have.”¹⁰⁸ Janet, however, explains that, when she “left Calgary in 1969, I said I would never, ever go back to a city.”¹⁰⁹ The housing in Vancouver reminds her of “pigeon-holes. How can people live

¹⁰⁵Nym, interview by author, 28 March 2007.

¹⁰⁶Nym, interview by author, 28 March 2007.

¹⁰⁷Yvette, interview by author, 18 May 2007.

¹⁰⁸Anne, telephone interview by author, 25 April 2007.

¹⁰⁹Janet, telephone interview by author, 29 May 2007.

there?” She declares that she could “never live in Vancouver.”¹¹⁰ Unlike the other women, Janet not only settled rurally, but also never kept a foot in the urban world. It is significant to note that she is only one of the nine narrators for whom this was true; to an overwhelming degree, the other narrators continually moved between rural and urban spaces.

Mobility is a practice affected by many economic factors, including the push to leave those rural areas that are less affluent, the pull of urban employment opportunities, and the financial burden of relocation itself. Class played an important role in the ability to participate in and comfort with circulation. Gayle Rubin, in her influential article “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” observes, “Migration is expensive. Transportation costs, moving expenses, and the necessity of finding new jobs and housing are economic difficulties that sexual migrants must overcome.”¹¹¹ However, she suggests that the routes of higher education and the military could offer “economic shelter.”¹¹² John Howard acknowledges, “Since racial hierarchies often dictated class hierarchies, mobility decreased for people of color, those with diminished financial resources.”¹¹³

The ties between lesbian mobility and financial independence have been established by other historians. Karen Duder credits the economic opportunities available to women following World War II for allowing several of the narrators in her study to

live with their partners in the postwar years and even to purchase homes together. Their financial reliance on family was minimal, and consequently they were able to move not only out of the homes in which they had been raised, but in many cases

¹¹⁰Janet, telephone interview by author, 29 May 2007.

¹¹¹Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 24.

¹¹²Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 24.

¹¹³Howard, *Men Like That*, 79.

across the country or even from other countries to Canada, allowing them to live lesbian lives completely out of the view of their families.¹¹⁴

Certainly a degree of financial solvency was still necessary to secure a mortgage and purchase property, but as much as finances were integral to mobility they could also be a push-factor that encouraged a rural relocation. Class is more complicated than straightforward economics, but it is important to consider that the financial ability to move, as well as a sense of freedom of movement, shaped the decision to relocate.¹¹⁵

The narrators come from a diversity of class backgrounds. Their parents held jobs that ranged from carpenters, farmers, military personnel, coal miners, secretaries, and business owners. The interpreters themselves have had a diversity of jobs throughout their lifetimes: they were teachers, writers, bartenders, taxi drivers, grant writers, kitchen staff, a lawyer, a real estate agent, and more. Brook worked in Vancouver as a chambermaid, bartender, and then mail-carrier before moving to Salt Spring, where she initially worked construction and eventually opened a used bookstore; she was one of only a few of the narrators who explicitly asserted a class identity during their interviews. She explains: “I come from a very working-class background and I consider myself a working-class person, although I’ve been a business person for more than twenty years.”¹¹⁶ She attributes having “always had money” to the fact that for most of her life she worked in what were

¹¹⁴Karen Duder, “The Spreading Depths: Lesbian and Bisexual Women in English Canada, 1910-1965” (PhD dissertation, University of Victoria, 2002), 353.

¹¹⁵Gender and race would have also affected the narrators’ ability and inclination to relocate. Their Caucasian backgrounds gave them access to a far greater range of spaces in the province than if they had been Chinese, Aboriginal, or another racialized minority. Societal shifts in the postwar era meant that being a woman was less of an impediment to mobility as women experienced increasing impendence and freedom of movement. Still, as women, lesbians—particularly during the earlier years under consideration—would have limited opportunities. As Veronica Strong-Boag writes, “British Columbia is a prosperous province, but it contains persistent and fundamental inequities based on class, race and gender... Gender in British Columbia—as in the rest of the country—has also been a major determinant of opportunity, whether it be in immigration, family life, waged labour or politics.” “Society in the Twentieth Century,” *The Pacific Province: A History of British Columbia*, ed. Hugh J.M. Johnston (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1996), 273.

¹¹⁶Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

traditionally considered “men’s jobs.”¹¹⁷ These women bought property when the practice was a rising trend for women throughout British Columbia and many of them built their own homes. One cannot help but speculate that their lack of children and marriages, combined with their relative economic independence, gave these women a greater freedom of movement: their circulatory patterns are at least partly attributable to the combination of their economic status *and* their sexual identities. In fact, Robbie *does* speculate that her life has been more active and free because of her sexuality:

I sometimes wonder what it would have been like if I’d of been ‘normal,’ whatever that is, or, you know, a heterosexual person; I wonder about that. But, I don’t think I was cut out for it in the first place, because I’ve done so many different things. My sister got married at whatever age people get married in those days, and she had her family, and they’re still in the same house. And they’re doing just fine. He’s not willing to retire entirely, though he’s past retirement age. And she chose to go back to work when her family got to that point in teenagedom, when the moms could do that. And there they are, remodelling. And I’ve built several houses, lived in many, and I wouldn’t change it. Amazing isn’t it? Now, is that because I was a lesbian? And the influences of being a lesbian?¹¹⁸

Regardless of their family or individual class backgrounds, the narrators had access to financial resources to buy land and relocate to rural areas. This was not an opportunity that would have been available to everyone. Many women, whether urban- or rurally-based, would have lacked the economic ability to relocate, although the draw of urban employment or cheaper rural land would have helped to allay this. A consideration of economic factors serves as a reminder that while circulation is potentially a significant and important characteristic of lesbian history, it is mitigated by class. It is only one of *many* ways to think about the intersection of geography and history in queer lives; however, it is applicable to the lives of these narrators.

¹¹⁷Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

¹¹⁸Robbie, telephone interview by author, digital recording, Gabriola Island, British Columbia, 16 May 2007.

All of these women were much more mobile than the existing narratives of lesbian history assume. They lived in multiple places, including big cities and small islands, as well as more ambiguous spaces, such as suburbs. Several of them lived or traveled in Europe and many of them lived outside Canada, even if only briefly. These women's lives do not follow the pattern of either fleeing the desolate hinterlands to find sexual freedom in the city, or escaping the city to find refuge from the heterosexist world. They relocated for myriad reasons, only some of which were directly related to their sexuality.

Relocation, wherever one's destination, offers many advantages to a gay person in a homophobic society, not the least of which is the opportunity to reinvent oneself, away from the watchful eyes of one's family and childhood community. While gay meccas offered many people the opportunity to, as Donna Smith recalls, move to the city "to become gay," geographically enabled self-reinvention has never been an exclusively urban phenomenon.¹¹⁹ As queer author Jim Grimsley writes about his experience growing up gay in the American South, "We came to the city for shelter, for a place where we could escape our families, many of us; if we did not move from the country to the city, then we moved from one city to another, or from one part of one city to another part of it; we left home in order to find some space for ourselves."¹²⁰ Kath Weston observes that the pressure to move to a big city was not reserved for just those in rural areas, but that those raised in urban centres were also drawn to relocation, "especially the sort that put miles between relatives and the person coming out."¹²¹ Larry Knopp goes further, arguing that many queer people, particularly gay

¹¹⁹Donna Smith, "Same Difference: My Southern Queer Stories," *Out in the South*, ed. Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 127.

¹²⁰Jim Grimsley, "Myth and Reality: The Story of Gay People in the South," *Out in the South*, ed. Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 233.

¹²¹Kath Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration," in *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 47.

men by his estimation, feel quite attached to movement itself, often finding pleasure and emotional security in it.¹²² In his work with Michael Brown, Knopp builds on this argument, noting, “Big-city and small-community queers alike are prone to resist heteronormative power by escaping, sometimes permanently and sometimes only temporarily, their home environments.”¹²³ These authors are not arguing that cities play an insignificant role in the development of queer subjectivities, but rather that urban spaces are only part of the story and they do not serve as a universal final destination.

The power of relocation in facilitating the formation of an alternate sexual identity is reflected in the number of narrators who had their first exposure to lesbianism or sexual experience with another woman either in the country or away from their homes. Brook was just thirteen when she and her first girlfriend went to visit a friend who lived on Salt Spring, the island on which Brook settled in 1978. They had been spending time together prior to their visit to the Island, but “this is where we started being intimate together.”¹²⁴ Attending a Christian Fellowship Camp on Thetis Island, one of the Gulf Islands, Robbie “became even more aware that my attractions were not normal.”¹²⁵ It was while at this camp that Robbie met the “first person I was attracted to, and who was attracted to me.”¹²⁶ Given their “intense little attraction for one another” it is hardly surprising that this woman became Robbie’s first girlfriend. Janet and Yvette also had their introductions to lesbianism while away from home, Janet while camping and Yvette while travelling for work.

¹²²Larry Knopp, “Ontologies of Place, Placelessness, and Movement: Queer Quests for Identity and Their Impacts on Contemporary Geographic Thought,” *Gender, Place and Culture* 11, no. 1 (March 2004): 124.

¹²³Michel Brown and Larry Knopp, “Queer Diffusions,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 21 (2003): 421.

¹²⁴Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

¹²⁵Robbie, telephone interview by author, 16 May 2007.

¹²⁶Robbie, telephone interview by author, 16 May 2007.

Nym's coming out, while not rural, did take place while she was living away from home, in England. In the early 1970s Nym was working at Women's Place, a multi-purpose Vancouver house that served as the home to various feminist activist groups, including the Lesbian Resource Centre. Nym remembers spending a great deal of time with these women while continuing to identify as heterosexual:

I hung out a lot with the women from the top floor at the Lesbian Resource Centre—we did these camping weekends, we went to the gay bars, and we hung out a lot. And one of my co-workers was a woman named Sandra, and she worked on the health project with me, and she wasn't a lesbian either. So Sandra and I would go out for lunch together every day and we'd go to this little café down the road from Women's Place and we'd eat BLTs and we'd gaze into each other's eyes and we would talk about how we weren't lesbians, because the women who were lesbians, knew they were lesbians, and we didn't know we were lesbians, and therefore we couldn't be. And we'd gaze into each other's eyes. So, I learned later that the lesbians on the third floor were laying bets about how long it would take for Sandra and I to actually get together. But we didn't know that at the time.¹²⁷

This changed the year she lived in England:

I remember very clearly thinking, "Well, here I am in London, nobody knows me. I can do whatever I want. I've always wanted to make love with a woman. So, this might be the chance and if I don't like it, then fine, nobody will ever know." So, that being very far away gave me a freedom to be experimental I doubt I would have found in Winnipeg, or even in Vancouver.¹²⁸

Given her work with the Lesbian Caucus and other BCFW volunteering, Nym had a great deal of contact with lesbians across the province and found the relocation narrative to dominate women's life stories:

We heard stories from a lot of women about how they had come to see themselves as lesbians and how that had been for them. And, I mean, it's a truism, but it's true that in those days people tended to leave where they grew up and go somewhere else. So, the stories that we would hear were often located in Newfoundland, or rural Ontario, or small-town Manitoba, or any number of places across Canada, but they weren't living there any more. The story, the arc of the story was, "And so I left and here I am now," wherever, British Columbia.¹²⁹

¹²⁷Nym, interview by author, 28 March 2007.

¹²⁸Nym, interview by author, 28 March 2007.

¹²⁹Nym, interview by author, 28 March 2007.

This arc did not apply just to lesbians in Vancouver, but also to “the women that lived in Nelson, and up North, and in the Interior.”¹³⁰ Nym points out, “If you’re looking for a partner, you were a lot better off in Vancouver than you were in Nelson,” but also stresses the wide-reaching resonance of relocation for lesbians across the province.¹³¹

Lesbians could be motivated to move rurally because of their sexuality, but for reasons other than developing a sexual identity. For Nym, the challenge of rurality was a test of her lesbianism. In describing the year that she spent living alone on Bowen Island, Nym explains that her enjoyment of the seclusion and being forced to rely on herself was connected to her understanding of her lesbianism:

I liked it. I really, really liked being alone. Because being a lesbian for me got shaped very much in feminism, there was a really strong conception that being a lesbian meant that you do could do anything. That being a lesbian meant that everything that anyone had ever told you about your limitations due to being a woman was a lie. And that it was your responsibility, sort of your political responsibility to prove that it was a lie by doing anything. So I have pictures of me climbing around on the rocks of Bowen Island, barefoot, in little cut-offs with a chainsaw, cutting up the logs. Now I had never had any—what did I know about chainsaws? Nothing. But it was a very strong mythology so that of course I could use a chainsaw. And if the chainsaw broke, of course I could fix it. And of course I could, I could do anything that needed to be done, because I was a lesbian, and lesbians could do anything, and the reason we thought we couldn’t—anybody who thought they couldn’t and was a woman, it was because we’d been lied to. So it was a very powerful experience of actually being responsible for myself in a way I’d never, ever had to be.¹³²

What was a challenge for Nym offered Robbie’s partner protection she was unable to find in the city. The couple moved from Vancouver to Indian Arm to escape the surveillance of the city and the threats to their relationship that a social life based in a bar scene posed. For Robbie’s partner, moving to the country allowed them to escape the

¹³⁰Nym, interview by author, 28 March 2007.

¹³¹Nym, interview by author, 28 March 2007.

¹³²Nym, interview by author, 28 March 2007.

“condemning eyes” of the city.¹³³ She was a teacher and every time they went to a gay club in town and she saw someone she recognized, she would panic, worried that she might run into a student. Living in Indian Arm while working in Vancouver insulated her private life from the exposure it faced in the city. Indian Arm was also appealing because it enabled the couple to

get away from the distractions of the community, the lesbian community in town, where there was lots of drinking, lots of partying. We would have a chance to grow and learn of each other in that kind of setting; it appealed to us both...The big city for her wasn't all that appealing. And it never was for me either. There we were, close by, but really out on our own. It was very appealing for both of us. We had more control over our lives, even though we were in that kind of raw setting.¹³⁴

For many of the narrators, however, the decision to live rurally had little or nothing to do with their sexuality. Instead, an enjoyment of rurality could often be traced to childhood experiences of visiting or being raised in the countryside. Jane, for example, explaining that she has preferred to live her life feeling insulated from the world, connects her enjoyment of living on Galiano Island to her childhood:

When I was a child, we spent—wherever we were—a couple of months in the Redwoods in northern California in a place that belonged to my family. We were ten miles from the nearest town. And there was a river and orchards, and huge redwood groves. And all sorts of wild creatures—bears and deer and skunks and chipmunks, and snakes and—and I learned, from the time I was very little—I mean, my brother was there, and my very much younger sister—but there was nobody else, except there was the river, and there were the trees, and it was just endlessly interesting to me, and the solitude was gorgeous. And my dream, when I was a kid was, wouldn't it be wonderful to live here all year round, and take that school bus that came along the highway. And now when September comes, I think, “Everybody's going. All the summer people are going, and I get to stay.” And it's not isolated in the same way. It certainly gave me a taste for it. We used to have guests come to stay for the weekend, and they'd arrive from the city just manic, you know, talking a mile an hour, and racing around the car unloading everything as if there were a fire. And we'd all be sort of lolling back on the porch furniture watching, and then we'd say, “Sorry, they'll be fine in the morning.” You

¹³³Robbie, telephone interview by author, 16 May 2007.

¹³⁴Robbie, telephone interview by author, 16 May 2007.

just see them quietly cool down. We'd just sit there—who are these weird creatures?¹³⁵

With reference to the specific draw of island living, Jane characterizes the ferry ride from mainland Vancouver to Galiano Island as one of the appeals that initially attracted her and her partner to moving there: “That wonderful thing about the ferry is that your drive is over, there’s nothing to do. And you can begin to let go of the tension.”¹³⁶

Those who chose not to relocate to the city were also driven by factors unrelated to sexuality. Anne’s explanation for continuing to live rurally had nothing to do with her sexuality: “I would never have been able to do the amount of writing that I’ve done if I lived in Vancouver or Toronto, because there are too many distractions.”¹³⁷ Janet’s disinterest in the city and her fondness of her memories of her childhood on the family farm have already been explored, but her attachment to rurality runs deeper. Reflecting on the draw of rurality, she asks:

Why do we have to have all of our population crowded into such a small area, when we have such a big beautiful country and province? Why can’t we spread out? Well, of course, we know the answer is economics, right? You know, that sort of thing. But this is where my upbringing and my, the nature, the goddess, the mother earth, the caring of our land and our food and all the animals and things touched me.¹³⁸

Whether the decision to was to move to or stay in a rural location, Jane, Anne, and Janet chose their homes based on things that had nothing to do with their sexuality, but rather an attachment to what they appreciated about rurality.

What makes these women’s patterns of circulation and complex reasons for (re)location particularly important is the historical context in which they occurred. These

¹³⁵Jane Rule, interview by author, digital recording, Galiano Island, British Columbia, 1 February 2007.

¹³⁶Jane Rule, interview by author, 1 February 2007.

¹³⁷Anne, telephone interview by author, 25 April 2007.

¹³⁸Janet, telephone interview by author, 29 May 2007.

narrators opted to build their lives in rural places during a period of rapid urbanization and when public lesbian communities were being established in metropolises. To privilege other interests over urban communities during a time when homosexuality was still popularly conceived of as an affront to normalcy suggests that people experience their sexuality differently and undermines arguments about the primacy of sexual identity for all queer people. For these women, other factors trumped access to an urban lesbian community when making important life decisions such as where to reside. When we complicate the way that we think about the rural-urban dichotomy, the role and character of rurality, and the mythology of gay migration, we open up new ways of thinking about sexuality, identity, and community in both the past and the present.

Chapter 2: 'Too close to Be Separate': Lesbians and Community

I said to my mother one time, "You know, you told me that Miss Harding got ill and Miss Dawson, who was a friend of hers, came home with her and looked after her and because they're such good friends." I said, "Miss Harding lived an awful long time." And we used to see them walking around in the evening, arm-in-arm as ladies did, right? And I'd see them down on the beach. And I said, "You know, did you ever think, Mom, maybe they were lesbians?" And she said, "Oh yes dear, I was quite sure they were." And I said, "Oh. Well, you never told me." And she said, "Well, you were just a little girl." I said, "Oh, Okay." "Because," she said, "You remember, after Miss Harding died"—and heck, as far as I know it took her about thirty years—"She took up with so-and-so who was the head teller in the bank and then when she died, Miss Dawson moved on with so-and-so, and then there was Sarah, Margaret, and..." And mom went through this list of ladies in town who I had never thought of except as members of the church ladies auxiliary. And she said, "There's a whole bunch of them over there in Shediac." Well, I mean, we lived in Shediac Cape, not Shediac. I think they must have known each other and had a social network and group. I can't imagine that Miss Dawson cut a wide path through Shediac, you know, seducing various unmarried ladies.¹³⁹

Robin's memories of lesbians in her 1940s childhood community of Shediac Cape, New Brunswick, highlight some significant features of the nature of lesbians' relationship to, existence in, and acceptance by rural communities. The women from Robin's childhood memories demonstrate one type of rural lesbian community: informal social connections, not tied to formal or public institutions. Several of the narrators participated in similar lesbian communities in British Columbia, but two other types of lesbian networks existed. On opposite ends of the structural spectrum, some narrators participated in formal, politicized, and public lesbian communities, while others were part of informal networks of rural lesbians who were casually aware of one another's presence. Lesbian networks were only one part of their experience of community; connections to the general population of the rural community provided many narrators with rich and rewarding relationships. In fact, several of the narrators found cities to be lonely or unwelcoming places and deeply valued

¹³⁹Robin, interview by author, digital recording, Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, 4 June 2006.

the interdependent nature of rural spaces—especially those of islands—feeling integrated into the community because, as Brook explains, “You’re too close to be separate.”¹⁴⁰ Far from finding their rural communities isolating or hostile, these narrators found various ways of forging connections with other lesbians and found themselves integrated into their communities.

Integral to the urban relocation stories that dominated early gay and lesbian histories of twentieth century North America was the assumption that developing urban homosexual communities provided relief from the desolate countryside, where sexual nonconformists lacked role models and support systems and were rejected by the local populations. This assumption ignored the sense of isolation that many lesbians, particularly those who relocated, felt in the city, as well as the connectedness and rootedness that many of them felt in their rural homes. This is not to erase the sense of isolation that many rural homosexuals did feel. As an article in the Canadian gay publication *The Body Politic* demonstrates, many people felt alone in the country and suffered because of it. In spring of 1972 C.K.T. wrote, “[I]f this person had considered committing suicide while living within subway-commuting distance of downtown Toronto, surely, he would be dead by now if he lived in Thunder Bay.”¹⁴¹ Still, the focus on rural isolation obscures the loneliness that lesbians could feel in cities in spite of the existence of more public gay communities.

The isolation that can exist in the city is perhaps best demonstrated by a story recounted by Jane Rule about her time in Vancouver in the 1960s. After observing that “[c]ities can be pretty lonely places for people,” Jane relayed a story about the devastating

¹⁴⁰Brook, interview by author, digital recording, Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, 24 May 2007.

¹⁴¹C.K.T., “A Long way to Thunder Bay,” *The Body Politic* 3 (May/June 1972): 19. Interestingly, while C.K.T. is asserting the extreme isolation he felt living in Thunder Bay, he is simultaneously inadvertently acknowledging the (lesser) existence of such feelings in the city.

impact of such isolation for one woman she knew.¹⁴² In 1964 while Jane was still living in Vancouver, *Desert of the Heart*, a lesbian novel she wrote was published. A female colleague of Jane's partner, Helen, at the University of British Columbia, approached her:

She said, you know—she was a fair bit older than I—“I'd always wanted to write, and I never had the guts to do it, and I'm so proud of you.” And, I didn't figure out it was a message—I thought it was a sweet thing for her to say. And she killed herself a year later. It was only then we found out that she was in a lesbian relationship. The loneliness of it, it was freaky. That she'd never appeared with her lover—her lover taught in the schools, but we didn't meet her until after she had killed herself. Well, we could have been a lot more help, if we'd only known.¹⁴³

Whether or not this woman's suicide was actually caused by isolation she felt as a lesbian is impossible to know, but that Jane interprets it that way suggests that she was aware of other lesbians who did feel isolated because of their sexuality. It is also possible that her perspective was influenced by the content of many letters she received after *Desert of the Heart* was published, as she recalls receiving letters that said, “You are the only person who could possibly understand me. I'm about to kill myself.”¹⁴⁴

Robin also describes being incredibly lonely while living in Vancouver in the early 1970s. Her loneliness was a consequence of many different factors, including the ostracism she faced as a female lawyer and her difficulty finding a lesbian support network:

You know, I'd finally figured out I was gay. I'd finally figured out I didn't want to be a lawyer. And I was just sort of sitting in Vancouver saying, “Oy-yoy-yoy.” And, I had to deal with all that. My father had died, like I said, and so I had inherited some money because we had sold the business. So, I bought a house up on 13th and Discovery—it's up near UBC. And I rented out rooms in the basement and managed to live on that, at least. And tried to get myself together because I was really a mess. And I was really paranoid because the one person whom I had shown any interest in—that would be the secretary [at the law firm where she worked]—had fled. I was very paranoid. I did not know how to deal with this. A couple of the guys in the law firm were bi[sexual], but they had wives and children.

¹⁴²Jane Rule, interview by author, digital recording, Galiano Island, British Columbia, 1 February 2007.

¹⁴³Jane Rule, interview by author, 1 February 2007.

¹⁴⁴Jane Rule, interview by author, 1 February 2007.

And they seemed to cope with it okay. So I just sort of soldiered on for a year or two.¹⁴⁵

She was aware of other lesbians in the city, but she found class differences made it difficult for her to relate to them: “I’ve only got so much in common with somebody who is really, just not making it. I mean, it was hard to have a conversation with someone who spent all their time moaning about what a bad time they were having. And they were having a bad time.”¹⁴⁶ Unhappy with her job and personal connections in Vancouver, in 1972 Robin bought property on Salt Spring Island and moved away from the city. Though she later connected with lesbian feminists whom she felt she had more in common with in Vancouver, the years that she spent in the city were lonely and isolating.

While Robin was aware of other lesbians in Vancouver, but not interested in connecting with them, nearly two decades earlier in the mid-1950s, Robbie had spent her teenage years in the city thinking that she was the only person with same-sex desires. She recalls going to see a doctor and asking for a pill to end her attraction to women and being sent to a psychiatrist. After a few visits, “I decided I wasn’t getting any answers here, and I guess I was what I thought I was. I rather, at that time, accepted my—I don’t even know if I used the word lesbianism—but I accepted my sexuality as I seemed to think it was, not for guys, but for women.”¹⁴⁷ Robbie had friends and connections in other dimensions of her life, but her sexual isolation remained an undercurrent: “I felt very alone and though I was active in sports and music at school—and it was lots of fun, I had a great time at school—there was still this thing about having heavy attractions to girls. It was just not even—it was

¹⁴⁵Robin, interview by author, 4 June 2006.

¹⁴⁶Robin, interview by author, 4 June 2006.

¹⁴⁷Robbie, telephone interview by author, digital recording, Gabriola Island, British Columbia, 16 May 2007.

a topic that wasn't even discussed."¹⁴⁸ By the late 1950s she had connected with other lesbians in Vancouver through her job at the Parks Board and her field hockey team, but her early years in the city were lonely.

Even Janet, who had been active in the Calgary lesbian bar scene and had visited Vancouver with friends and gone to the lesbian bars there before moving to British Columbia, did not see cities as welcoming places. After her partner left her and Janet was lonely and panicked on Vancouver Island, she did not make an effort to make contact with a Vancouver lesbian community, despite the city's proximity. Explaining why she never considered this as an option, she recalls:

I knew that there was lesbian community in Vancouver, but then when I got over here in the '70s, in '77 [when the relationship ended], to go to Vancouver, and to work here, by myself, to look for lesbian community, that was a nightmare. I wouldn't be walking down the streets of Vancouver saying, "Hey lesbians, where are you?" I didn't even know. That was scary. That was like putting a child out to pasture who had never seen a pasture before.¹⁴⁹

In Janet's experience, the city hardly represented a welcoming place that would provide her with a supportive community; instead, it loomed as another place where she would be isolated and lonely.

As these stories show, many lesbians actually experienced acute isolation and loneliness within the city during the 1950, '60s, and '70s. For some, this isolation was directly related to a lack of lesbian connections, but others experienced isolation that a lesbian community could not alleviate. Urban isolation is not unique to homosexuals, but it does contradict the presumption that the city was the solution to the "rural" problem of gay isolation. As Will Fellows observes in his book about gay men who grew up in the American rural Midwest, "For many of them, the dislocation of living in an urban culture after growing

¹⁴⁸Robbie, telephone interview by author, 16 May 2007.

¹⁴⁹Janet, telephone interview by author, digital recording, Gabriola Island, British Columbia, 29 May 2007.

up rural was in some ways similar to that of being gay but living in a heterosexist culture; in both regards, they felt like outsiders.”¹⁵⁰

In addition to experiences of urban isolation, these narrators also found or established lesbian networks and communities in the country. Historian John Howard argues that, for rural homosexuals, “[H]uman interactions are conceptualized and described less in terms of community or culture, than in terms of networks—often organic and incohesive, but sometimes consciously well structured.”¹⁵¹ This definition helps to illuminate the very real connections with other gay women shared by these rural lesbians. Beyond the ties that many of the narrators maintained to Vancouver’s lesbian communities are the local networks that they established or participated in while living rurally. These connections demonstrate the range of possibilities for non-urban lesbian networks. The diverse array of experiences provides accounts of three types of rural lesbian communities: women who had a general awareness of other lesbians in their region; women whose private friendship networks were consciously, if not publicly, constructed as lesbian spaces; and the public and political lesbian communities constructed in the spirit of lesbian feminism.

The networks of lesbians who were aware of one another’s existence are particularly significant because they offer insights into the diversity of ways that rural lesbians connected with one another. Robin, Brook, and Jane were all part of networks like these. Coming from very different perspectives on and experiences with lesbian community, these three narrators demonstrate how there are limitations to similar sexual attractions as the basis for socializing. At the same time, however, they also recognize times when such relationships have been of

¹⁵⁰Will Fellows, *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 311.

¹⁵¹John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 14.

great value to them. The balance of these two experiences helps to explain their more tangential relationship to local lesbians: they neither unilaterally prioritized nor entirely rebuffed lesbian connections, resulting in informal ties to other gay women.

As already discussed, class differences proved too great a deterrent for Robin to overcome when she met her first group of lesbians while living in Vancouver. Making lesbian connections was important to her, but clearly a shared sexual identity was not enough common ground. Her quest for a lesbian community of a particular class of lesbians was important enough to her that Robin maintained strong ties to Vancouver after rurally relocating. However, she was also aware of, and in touch with, regional lesbians after she moved to Salt Spring Island in 1972. She found out about lesbians on the Island through Vancouver connections, but also found out about events in the city through her Island contacts. Her first lover on Salt Spring was a woman who initially simply showed up at her door:

She knew I was living in that house. She had a cottage [down the way from me]. And she came and knocked on my door one night and said, “Hi, I’m Carol and you’re Robin and I knew that you were living here.” Oh, I think, I started going to lesbian things in Vancouver and people must have told her there was a woman named Robin who lived out there. And so that’s how.¹⁵²

One of the Vancouver “things” that Robin went to were dinner and dances put on by a local lesbian social organization, Gazebo Connection, which aimed to connect middle-class and professional gay women.¹⁵³ Robin’s initial connection with Gazebo was a result of her partner’s housemate’s involvement in its organizing. Robin’s network flowed in multiple directions.

¹⁵²Robin, interview by author, 4 June 2006.

¹⁵³The Gazebo Connection was started in 1980 and is still active today. See “History,” *The Gazebo Connection*, <http://www.gazeboconnection.com/history.html>.

This is not meant to paint a utopic vision of a lesbian network that extended through the Gulf Islands in which all of the lesbians were known to and shared information among one another. In fact, Robin remembers many people who were too scared to make local connections:

The very first Gazebo meeting we went to in Vancouver this woman came in the door and was talking to Sarah. And Sarah said, "Oh, you must meet Robin, she's from Salt Spring too." So, she turned around to get me and she turned around again, and the woman was going out the door. I mean, that's how nervous people were. So I have no idea how many [lesbians] there were on the Island.¹⁵⁴

In addition to lesbians who did not wish to make connections, there were also gay women who lived in the Gulf Islands who tried to find a lesbian community, but came up empty-handed. One anecdote in Tom Warner's history of queer activism in Canada describes a woman who

moved to the Gulf Islands of British Columbia and encountered profound social isolation. She didn't know whether to feel safe or to whom she could come out as a lesbian as there were no visible gay or lesbian social networks. She eventually joined a small "Women's Spirituality Evening" but met "silence, stares, a gap in the discussion" each time she mentioned being a lesbian; the other women didn't feel safe talking about it.¹⁵⁵

Although Warner asserts that her was "not an anomalous situation," neither was Robin's experience of making lesbian connections on the Island.¹⁵⁶ Some women found small communities isolated and lonely, but others were very successful at finding other lesbians. Robin had such connections not only in Vancouver, but also on Salt Spring, and on other surrounding islands, as did Brook and Jane. While some lesbians experienced rural isolation, their lives must not be left to stand as the only possibility.

¹⁵⁴Robin, interview by author, 4 June 2006.

¹⁵⁵Tom Warner, *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 306.

¹⁵⁶Warner, *Never Going Back*, 306.

Describing her life when she first moved to Salt Spring Island in 1978, Brook reveals, “I would say we didn’t have enough of the country sisters—that was my feeling—who really enriched each other.”¹⁵⁷ However, she also indicates feeling a part of a larger, more national lesbian community. Likening being a lesbian to being part of a grapevine, Brooke explains, “It’s like AA, you always have a friend, no matter where you go, right? If you’re a dyke, you’ve got a friend no matter where you go. You might not always like each other and you might be like, ‘Oh, we’re *really* different.’ But you’ve got this bottom line, you’re in the same camp.”¹⁵⁸ While she characterizes herself as an outsider to her local lesbian community, her explanation of it reflects that whether she was actively participating by attending lesbian events or not, she has been aware of other lesbians in the Lower Mainland and the Gulf Islands, and they have been aware of her: “The gay community—the people I know, lots and lots know me because of how old I am and how central I’ve been.”¹⁵⁹ In fact, in opposition to Robin’s experience, Brook can remember a time when she “knew the name of every lesbian who lived on Salt Spring Island. I might not have known them, but I knew the name of every one of them.”¹⁶⁰

Brook posits herself as part of a more broadly-defined lesbian community, explaining, “I’m still more comfortable being—if I’m in a strange city and I see another dyke, I feel more comfortable than if I see another straight person. There’s always that element that there was a good feeling about that, a safe feeling about that.”¹⁶¹ That degree of comfort, however, did not drive her to an exclusively lesbian community: “[There] were

¹⁵⁷Brook, interview by author, digital recording, Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, 1 December 2006.

¹⁵⁸Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

¹⁵⁹Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

¹⁶⁰Brook, interview by author, 24 May 2007.

¹⁶¹Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

some dykes who were very exclusive, only wanted to be with other women, hang out with other women, Louise and I weren't like that."¹⁶² They may not have been exclusive, but Brook and her partner did make lesbian connections when they first moved to Salt Spring in 1978. Although the island was hardly akin to the Vanport bar scene they were active in while living in Vancouver, they did befriend a young dyke: "She hung out with us, you know, she was just coming out. She already knew some other dykes, just sort of peripherally and a little bit, but we were her main—we welcomed her all the time. And we were very stable. We were, I think, a really good influence on her."¹⁶³ The peripheral connections of their young friend further demonstrates the existence of a casual network of lesbians on Salt Spring in the 1970s. Brook may have been uninterested in exclusive socializing, but she still had an awareness of and connection to the other lesbians on Salt Spring.

Brook's lesbian connections when she was a teenager in Hope from 1967 to 1969 were of a similar nature. She recalls connecting with a butch-femme couple, Sandy and June, a waitress and cab driver:

I think I started eating pie at that restaurant, and it was a restaurant that none of the high school kids went to in town. It was like a really weird thing to do, 'cause it's like where all the truckers, and hunters, and the forest rangers, and those kind of guys would go. So, I went and had pie and coffee there. And then, after about the third time she talked to me and then we sort of got talking. And then eventually they said, "Well, if you want to come up for a visit, if you want to have dinner or drop by for coffee some time, why don't you?" I visited them a few times.¹⁶⁴

Her rural lesbian contacts while living in Hope were not limited to just Sandy and June, who eventually took her under their wing, but also included some women she had been connected with through the Association for Social Knowledge (ASK), the Vancouver homophile organization she had participated in when living in the city. Brook's ASK

¹⁶²Brook, interview by author, 24 May 2007.

¹⁶³Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

¹⁶⁴Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

contacts put in her touch with a lesbian who owned a campground north of Hope and a woman from Vancouver who was fixing up a cabin on the property.

Awareness similar to Robin and Brook's existed throughout British Columbia in the 1970s. As Yvette encountered in her travels throughout British Columbia with the Lesbian Caucus, lesbians were quite often known to one another, even when hidden from the public. Yvette recalls how "we would end up in these towns where the straight feminists would come to the workshop. The lesbians would not come. It was too threatening for them to come. We always knew there were lesbians in these towns. Always knew."¹⁶⁵ The question then became, "How are we going to find them? How are they going to find us? Because they're not going to come to the big 'Come to the Lesbian workshop!' They're not going to do that."¹⁶⁶ It was here that Yvette's policy of always disclosing her sexuality was an invaluable resource: "People could find me. I'd get little messages about, 'Do you want to go for coffee?' 'Do you want to have a drink? Do you want to...?' So, I would just put myself in public places and people would find me." The lesbians she and the other Caucus members encountered were not a unified group of women with a universal experience: "There was a mix. There was really a mix. When I think back, thousands, really thousands of women, but also thousands of lesbians across the country. It's just amazing. So, there'd be varieties. There'd be the women who had their lover and that was it, that was their universe."¹⁶⁷ There were also women who were tied into lesbian networks and would introduce the Caucus to other gay women in the region.

Jane was disinterested in locating a lesbian community or even making specifically lesbian connections. She explains, "I have always felt a bit claustrophobic in any group that

¹⁶⁵Yvette, interview by author, digital recording, Toronto, Ontario, 18 May 2007.

¹⁶⁶Yvette, interview by author, 18 May 2007.

¹⁶⁷Yvette, interview by author, 18 May 2007.

is homogenous. I hated school, being locked into one age group. And I thought: our culture does it to us.”¹⁶⁸ She proclaims, “I think common cause is about the worst way to get together with people. For one thing, you never hear anybody else’s views, and you get narrower and more rabid, and I just think it’s unhealthy.”¹⁶⁹ Shortly after she moved to Galiano Island in the mid-1970s there was an article in a national magazine that announced, “Not since Lesbos has there been an island with so many creative women on it.” Jane’s reaction was: “There isn’t a gay community here. If there were, I’d move.”¹⁷⁰ While she qualifies that she would not actually have relocated, she adds:

I’ve never really been interested in groups of women who are exclusive. It’s being absolutely absorbed in one party identity, which doesn’t interest me. I’m not uninterested in my sexuality, but it’s certainly only part of who I am. And, I don’t assume that I will have much in common with another lesbian.¹⁷¹

Despite this scepticism of community, Jane can remember a few important experiences in her life when she understood the appeal of lesbian community. Even as she recalls events in which being surrounded by other gay people provided her with a sense of comfort, she characterizes them as unreal and certainly not something she would have ever invested any energy in further pursuing. One of the most insightful of these moments came when she was given an award by the National Gay Community Fund for Dignity and had to give an acceptance speech. For the first time, she did not feel any of the usual symptoms of nervousness:

To speak to a crowd with no one in it that I knew [and not be nervous]—I thought, is some of my unease in public because I’m gay? It had never crossed my mind. I just thought, most of us are, in some sense geared up, in some sense stage fright. The heart’s pumping, the adrenaline—I just didn’t have it, it was just not there.

¹⁶⁸Jane Rule, interview by author, 1 February 2007.

¹⁶⁹Jane Rule, interview by author, 1 February 2007.

¹⁷⁰Jane Rule, interview by author, 1 February 2007.

¹⁷¹Jane Rule, interview by author, 1 February 2007.

And that depressed me a bit. I thought, I wouldn't think of myself as thinking of the world as hostile—I don't. But, it felt home. But I've had very few experiences like that. And I don't think I'd seek them out. And they are, to a real extent, unreal. There are just as many difficult people out there in the crowd.¹⁷²

Jane is very clear that she sees lesbian community as a false ideal, but she appreciates the reasons for its importance to other gay people: while she has never felt excluded because she is a lesbian, she knows that many people have and she understands that exclusion is a significant motivation for seeking out gay community.

Despite not seeking out gay contacts in her life, Jane has ended up with a plethora of gay and lesbian friends. Her status as a public lesbian figure has meant that many lesbians have sought out connections with her. One of the most critical of romanticized notions of community, Jane was careful to characterize her gay friends as part of her larger community consisting of people with shared interests. She explains, "I didn't live in a gay-defined culture, ever. More here than anywhere. And it certainly is not just gay here, but I have many more friends who are gay here than I did in the city."¹⁷³ She emphasizes that her friendships with other lesbians exist "because we're interested in the same kind of literature, and politics, and painting—and children and old people. And you know, whatever we're doing," but concedes, "There are commonnesses that are nice. You know, understandings of certain difficulties of living that are helpful."¹⁷⁴ She may not have sought out a lesbian community, but she was part of a lesbian network regardless.

Other lesbians, like Mearnie and Robbie, built and participated in specifically lesbian friendship networks. Though these networks did not constitute Mearnie and Robbie's only social connections, they were their dominant ones. The private nature of the network in

¹⁷²Jane Rule, interview by author, 1 February 2007.

¹⁷³Jane Rule, interview by author, 1 February 2007.

¹⁷⁴Jane Rule, interview by author, 1 February 2007.

which they participated in Indian Arm during the 1960s and 1970s made it easier for women to control who knew about their sexual identity. It also would have made it more difficult for women not already socially connected to the group to make contact with them. For the women who were involved, however, the community provided them with a safe and supportive environment in which to be social with their partners.

When Mearnie first moved to Indian Arm in 1950, there were very few other people living there at all, let alone other lesbians. “Eventually over the thirty years I was there, slowly my friends started buying [property at Indian Arm], my women [friends], they slowly started buying, and then there were men. So we got, you were accepted by your own and the others, if that was your neighbour. But, it was always, still, never discussed.”¹⁷⁵ By the time that she moved to Salt Spring in 1996 she had built up an extensive network of gay and lesbian contacts in Indian Arm:

Well, it was just that you knew, who around were living together. And therefore when you had a party, we always had dancing parties. Oh, we danced. And then I had regattas. I had a regatta every year at my place... We had dancing at the end of the day. And so, their friends would bring their friends that were gay or lesbian, you know? Because we knew they would be able to relax.¹⁷⁶

The practice of not acknowledging or discussing homosexuality made this community less visible, but no less important. Like the middle-class lesbian communities that have been documented in urban centres, Mearnie’s Indian Arm community was facilitated by a financial status that allowed for private house parties, but it is still a significant example of a rural lesbian community.

Part of this same group of women, Robbie was aware of and casually active with the other lesbians in Indian Arm while she lived there between 1970 and 1978. She attended the

¹⁷⁵Mearnie, interview by author, digital recording, Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, 5 June 2006.

¹⁷⁶Mearnie, interview by author, 5 June 2006.

house parties that were held on a regular basis. She remembers, “The women that would come there were usually—even if they weren’t speaking out loud about it—they were usually lesbian women. Professional lesbian women: teachers, nurses, things like that. And we used to have a good time.”¹⁷⁷ Similar to urban middle-class lesbians who have a history of preferring house parties over the bar culture, the women in Indian Arm, according to Robbie,

were just groups of women who got together and had a good time. If they came together, they came together. If they left together, they left together. If they lived together, they lived together. It was not a topic of discussion. People didn’t openly discuss their lesbianism as happens nowadays...Even if you knew everybody there was of like thinking, you didn’t talk much about it.¹⁷⁸

The reasons for this discretion may have been a consequence of both class and generation. Many of these women had grown up during a time when they did not have access to language to describe their sexuality. Also, their general professional status meant that they may have felt they had a lot to lose—security, money, status—if their sexuality were made public. This point is reinforced by Nym’s observation that when she had a steady, well-paying job while living rurally, she hid her sexuality for the first time in her life: “Losing my job was suddenly a possibility—was a meaningful fear in a way it never had been in the past. I had something to lose. So, I was closeted in my work.”¹⁷⁹ By the time a more open and public gay community formed in the area, Robbie and her partner were established in Indian Arm and saw themselves as “another couple amongst heterosexual couples” and less in need of explicitly lesbian connections, as they felt accepted as a couple by the broader

¹⁷⁷Robbie, telephone interview by author, 16 May 2007.

¹⁷⁸Robbie, telephone interview by author, 16 May 2007.

¹⁷⁹Nym, interview by author, digital recording, Vancouver, British Columbia, 28 March 2007.

population.¹⁸⁰ Still, over the years that she lived in the community, Robbie knew and was known to the other lesbians there, even though their sexuality was not discussed.

Although their lesbianism was never discussed, Mearnie, Robbie, and their friends in Indian Arm surely constituted a gay and lesbian community, particularly when Karen Duder's definition is used. Duder argues that, while women forming "friendships and social networks based on their same-sex desires" may not be "lesbian or bisexual community in the modern, political sense, it did provide women with the sense that they were not alone, that they shared their attractions to women with others, and that they could find at least a few people in the world with whom they could express who they were. This is ... community."¹⁸¹ The women in Indian Arm did not come together to strategize how to fight heterosexism. In fact, their attachment to privacy reflects a desire not to challenge the status quo in overt ways, but rather to privately create space to live their lives. Fitting with Duder's definition, they did create community by virtue of making that space for one another.

Deeply affected by and involved with the lesbian feminism of the 1970s, Nym participated in building lesbian community on much more explicit and public terms than the other narrators. She did this work on a broad, provincial level, as well as on a local and personal level. Her political activism and much of her time were devoted to the lesbian-feminist community in Vancouver and to travelling throughout the province, working to build ties between the various communities. Because of these strong ties to an urban-based activism, she actually had very little contact with the lesbians in her immediate region while she lived in Chilliwack, 1976-77, or during her early years in the Fraser Valley in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Her BCFW activities, her work with and time at Amazon Acres, the

¹⁸⁰Robbie, telephone interview by author, 16 May 2007.

¹⁸¹Karen Duder, "The Spreading Depths: Lesbian and Bisexual Women in English Canada, 1910-1965" (PhD dissertation, University of Victoria, 2002), 51.

lesbian farm outside of Mission, and her later efforts in the Fraser Valley represent a more deliberate and obviously political form of lesbian community building.

Amazon Acres was ten acres of land that Nym, her partner at the time, and a friend bought in the late 1970s and turned into a lesbian feminist gathering space. She describes the property as having one small two-room cabin with no electricity or running water, and as a home to goats, horses, chickens, geese, and pigs. Nym's mother joined them shortly after they had bought the property, and Amazon Acres was only ever home to those four women, yet it "became well-known in the lesbian community in Vancouver and we would have work parties where dozens and dozens of women would come up from Vancouver and help us with the garden and put up fences."¹⁸² Women would stay for weekends, but a lack of accommodations ruled out longer visits in the winter. Summer guests had to camp on the property, something that was common during the children's camps that Nym and the other women ran during the summers. During later years Nym lived at Amazon Acres alone and the land was less and less connected to Vancouver lesbian activism, however its initial establishment was directly tied to helping build lesbian community.¹⁸³

It was not until she lived at Amazon Acres alone for a long time and her Vancouver contacts had begun to dwindle that Nym connected with local gay women. Unlike the

¹⁸²Nym, interview by author, 28 March 2007.

¹⁸³Amazon Acres was not the only women's land space established in British Columbia during the 1970s. Although it has yet to be historically documented, a lesbian commune in Coombs on Vancouver Island, called Rubyfruit Ranch (seemingly named after *Rubyfruit Jungle*, Rita Mae Brown's 1973 lesbian bildungsroman), was mentioned by several of the narrators. Robin, Brook, Nym, and Janet, though not directly involved with Rubyfruit, were all aware of its existence. Further, the generational divide between the women of Indian Arm's lesbian network (Mearnie and Robbie) and those tied to Amazon Acres and lesbian feminist activist supports historian Martin Meeker's hypothesis about the difference between female homophiles and lesbian feminists in the American context. Meeker argues, "The female homophiles, although ambitious in their context, limited their goals to establishing networks where none existed before, while the lesbian-feminists of *Amazon Quarterly* and their sister publications used those foundations to pursue an alternative culture and society that need not be run by the rules of the established order." *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 242-43.

political and structured community in which she had participated in Vancouver, she encountered a much more scattered group of gay women in the Fraser Valley:

I think the only time I would say that I've sought that [lesbian community] out was in some of those later years in Mission, when I was working full-time in Abbotsford, [and] I was living alone on the farm. My connections, my local connections, which were increasingly important to me, because I needed somewhere to have a bath. I *needed* friends in my own geographic community, so I did actively seek out—well, it wasn't so much "seek out" because it wasn't like it existed and I had to go and find it. What I did...was to try to create community, so create groups that would bring lesbians together. Create events that would bring lesbians together...So, the, I mean, if there was a community there, I didn't know how to connect with it. I knew a lot of women. I mean, I must have known twenty, thirty women—lesbians—who lived around that area. But there wasn't a bar. There wasn't an organization. There wasn't anything.¹⁸⁴

The events that Nym helped to organize included putting together a local softball team to play in a lesbian softball tournament in Vancouver and inviting a women's theatre group from Vancouver to come to Abbotsford to give performances. Although she did miss the more traditional, structured urban lesbian community, Nym was able to establish connections with a few dozen lesbians in her region. Her time at Amazon Acres most significantly reflects her efforts to build a structured and political lesbian community.

Two other experiences of lesbian community were represented by the narrators: those women who were uninterested in lesbian community and those unable to connect to one despite desiring to do so. Anne was completely uninterested in lesbian community. She has "always enjoyed going to women's dances, and, other than that, some house parties," but otherwise she has not

been the least bit community-minded in any easily recognizable fashion. 'There's a whole bunch of stuff about 'sisterhood is power' that just makes me want to puke. Just because a woman says that she's a lesbian and a feminist is no reason for me to

¹⁸⁴Nym, interview by author, 28 March 2007. Nym's assessment of the Fraser Valley are echoed in Linda McCarthy's recent comparison of rural and urban spaces: "Whereas cities provide numerous opportunities for socializing, through bars, gay and lesbian community centers, and political and social organizations, rural areas offer none of this. Rural lesbians then, are responsible for creating their own informal networks." *Journal of Homosexuality* 39, no. 1 (2000): 83.

even suspect that we have anything in common, or that I'm going to be able to put up with her.¹⁸⁵

More than just rejecting its value to herself, Anne also questions how much community has meant to others: "I don't feel that community really does mean a lot to some of the people who are making the most noise about it because I really, really question their commitment, even to themselves—they're like a bunch of dilettantes who are trying out a new flavour this week. And community is the flavour."¹⁸⁶ Anne compares the discourse of community to that of her Jehovah's Witness upbringing:

This imposition of the concept of community and the standards that we are told this community has fashioned and expects us to follow require a faith and a belief—and for all I know, a prayer—that is no different than what that repressive religion imposed. It's turn off your brain, shut your fucking mouth, and do as you're told to do. I'm sorry, I'm not gonna do it! I'm not gonna do it, because repression is repression. Don't tell me that you're repressing me for my own good. Because you can kiss my ass. I don't need to be matronized any more than I ever needed to be patronized. That's what the community bullshit is doing. We're being matronized into becoming sheeple.¹⁸⁷

Anne's strong feelings are not specific to lesbian community, but rather suggest a general rejection of what she perceives to be imposed uniformity—a reaction largely stemming from her anger towards the religion of her childhood.

Despite her abhorrence of community, Anne does credit the development of a public community with making lesbianism thinkable for her. She asserts that

[a]n alternate sexuality wasn't even on the horizon. I would have had to have invented it for myself. And I don't expect everybody to be able to invent rocket science, and I certainly don't think everybody can forge for themselves a radical change from a very repressive upbringing.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵Nym, interview by author, 28 March 2007.

¹⁸⁶Anne, telephone interview by author, digital recording, Tahsis, Vancouver Island, British Columbia, 25 April 2007.

¹⁸⁷Anne, telephone interview by author, 25 April 2007.

¹⁸⁸Anne, telephone interview by author, 25 April 2007.

It was not until 1977, a year after her divorce, when lesbianism was much more publicly visible, that it became conceivable for Anne.

Janet, though she desperately wanted a local lesbian community on Vancouver Island, did not know how to connect with one. After the partner with whom Janet had migrated to Qualicum ended their relationship, Janet was lonely and isolated. She did not know any other lesbians and had not told anyone she knew locally about her sexuality. She thought,

“What am I going to do now? I really wish I could find community and there has to be—there was community in Calgary,” said I. “There has to be community, if not in this area, at least in Nanaimo, or Victoria.” And I didn’t know where to go. I didn’t know who to talk to. I felt alone. And I couldn’t talk to people at work, couldn’t talk to people I worked for. After all, there was family there. I worked with my distant cousin. It was shock. Panic set in. That’s all I can think of today, when I’m talking to you now. Panic set in.¹⁸⁹

It was that sense of fear and loneliness that pushed Janet into a heterosexual marriage.

Having ended her marriage and reconnected with an old friend whom she knew through the Calgary lesbian scene, in the late 1990s she suddenly found herself in the lesbian community she had been searching for on the Island: “We’d get to go to dances and things that I had not seen on this island since I’d been [here] in 1969, and this is 1992!”¹⁹⁰

Experiences of isolation and community co-existed in the Gulf Islands in the 1970s, just as they did in the city. Robin, Brook, Jane, Mearnie, Robbie, and Nym had connections to extensive lesbian networks, while Janet felt completely alone. Finding a lesbian community was not easy or even possible for everyone who desired it, but it was possible for a number of the narrators. Some actively sought out lesbian contacts, tapping into or helping to establish connections between gay women in the Gulf Islands and throughout the

¹⁸⁹Janet, telephone interview by author, 29 May 2007.

¹⁹⁰Janet, telephone interview by author, 29 May 2007.

Lower Mainland. Others did not seek such contacts and did not describe the connections that they had as constituting a lesbian community. Still others were urban-based, but worked to connect and establish links with rural lesbians. The solitude offered by rurality did not have to mean isolation from other lesbians. Circulation and their continued contacts in the city were partly responsible for this, but the potential for local lesbian contacts clearly existed for nearly all of the women, even if only some of them made them.

The ambivalence towards connecting with or building a local lesbian community that several of the narrators expressed was partly related to one's relationship status. Jane, Brook, Robbie, Janet, Nym, and Mearnie all moved to a rural location with partners, while Anne always lived rurally. Robin, the only narrator to move away from the city on her own, describes her early days on Salt Spring Island as isolated. One thing lesbian community can provide is a group of "like others" to offer a support system and safe social space to meet potential partners, but these requirements are lessened when one is already partnered. As was argued in a recent article on aging lesbians who live in rural spaces, "[T]he rural context can mean fewer social opportunities for lesbians, particularly those who are not in a relationship."¹⁹¹ Geographer Jo Little contends that lesbians "have no obvious place in the rural community to meet potential partners or to gain support and advice from one another."¹⁹² The important term there is "obvious" for, as has been demonstrated, lesbian networks did exist in rural areas. However, having a partner would quite likely have mitigated the potential for a sense of isolation and the urgency of connecting with other lesbians. Furthermore, lesbian couples might mark themselves as homosexual, through

¹⁹¹Susan A. Comerford et al., "Crone Songs: Voices of Lesbian Elders on Aging in a Rural Environment," *Affilia* 19, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 426.

¹⁹²Jo Little, "Gender, Sexuality, and Rurality," in *Gender and Rural Geography: Identity, Sexuality and Power in the Countryside* (Harlow and New York: Prentice Hall, 2002), 169.

either subtle or obvious interactions with one another, more easily than single lesbians who must find other ways to mark themselves as gay in order to connect with other lesbians.

Many of the interpreters who moved to rural areas with partners describe having little initial interest in their local communities. Jane characterizes her and her partner's relocation as a means of escaping the city: "We came to get away, we didn't come to make friends. And we were very slow to make friends on the Island, because we really had too many already."¹⁹³ These sentiments are echoed by Nym's description of only making contact with the vet and the mechanic while living in Chilliwack and taking a long time before being interested in forming contacts with the local lesbians when she lived at Amazon Acres. While Nym and Jane's disinterest in meeting local lesbians was at least partly due to their connections to broader communities, it is entirely plausible that their relationship status also played an important role. For Janet, the choice not to pursue a local lesbian community when she first moved to British Columbia was partner-driven, but for very different reasons from Jane's. Although Janet had wanted to "tune into what I thought would be the Nanaimo scene," her partner "was not interested," largely because of her family's religious background.¹⁹⁴ It was not until that relationship ended that Janet's isolation became apparent.

Alternatively, one of the major draws of rural relocation for Robbie and her partner was a chance to make a go of things on their own, and break away from the lesbian community. Over time, however, that isolation began to lose its appeal and turn to loneliness that she sees as the catalyst for her alcohol addiction. Although Robbie characterizes Indian Arm as giving her a "really a good life," she clarifies, "But it was a lonely

¹⁹³Jane Rule, interview by author, 1 February 2007.

¹⁹⁴Janet, telephone interview by author, 29 May 2007.

life.” A good friend of hers later observed, “You know Robbie, you were lonely.”¹⁹⁵ While she believes that “I would have been an alcoholic whether I was up there or not, because I have all the tendencies,” she also sees a connection between the isolation and her drinking: “Being up there, by myself, with just one other person, and then being there while she’s away at work for long periods—[a good friend] believed that it just wore me down and I chose alcohol.”¹⁹⁶ Initially the draw of the country, feeling isolated from everyone but her partner turned into a drawback for Robbie.

Regardless of whether moving with a partner eased the pressure of connecting with lesbian community, it definitely removed the problem of finding a partner in places with small populations, and even smaller lesbian populations. When asked about the dilemma of how to find other lesbians in rural communities, Anne, who lived rurally and had no use for lesbian community, laughed the question off. She argues, “There’s a lot more of us in the country than people realize.”¹⁹⁷ Yvette relies on a similar assumption of widespread, if unseen, lesbian existence when explaining how she knew for sure that there were lesbians in the various communities that she visited. She sees her on homosexuality and rural background as evidence that lesbians existed in all corners of British Columbia: “If I come from St. Lazare, somebody comes from Terrace. Three-hundred-and-sixty-nine people, French Catholic—we show up. We’re kind of home grown.”¹⁹⁸ These answers, although they do not actually give concrete, tangible explanations, echo those of the other women. When explaining how they met the women they dated and the lesbians they befriended, most of the women did not actually name the lesbian communities of which they were part.

¹⁹⁵Robbie, telephone interview by author, 16 May 2007.

¹⁹⁶Robbie, telephone interview by author, 16 May 2007.

¹⁹⁷Anne, telephone interview by author, 25 April 2007.

¹⁹⁸Yvette, interview by author, 18 May 2007.

Describing meeting a woman who went on to become a good friend of hers, Janet explains, “I knew she was a lesbian right off the bat.”¹⁹⁹

Still, the visual and social cues of lesbianism could be subtle or difficult to describe and, as Yvette points out, they could differ between the city and the country:

Farm women are all tough women. You’ve got women in boots and flannel shirts, and they’re somebody’s wife with a pack of kids, but they’re—and this is something I find fascinating with city women going out to the small rural areas is they can’t tell who’s a dyke and who’s not a dyke, right? They just look at these strong prairie women and think, “Oh, there’s a bunch of lesbians.” You’re not getting the cues; you’re not getting the visual stuff.²⁰⁰

Referencing the more contemporary term “gaydar,” Brook explains, “There are many, many, many women that I’ve seen and recognized in my life as lesbians.”²⁰¹ She clarifies that it was by no means an exact science: “I’ve also been surprised, many times in my life, at women who are lesbians.”²⁰² However, she credits this almost inscrutable sense of recognition with making a lot of connections:

I think, by and large, lesbians find each other because they want to. It’s that simple... People find each other because they do. Blind people find each other, deaf people find each other, people that can’t read find each other. That’s just a tiny portion, but, no, you just meet somebody. I haven’t met the greatest love of my life because I walked into a gay bar or because I went to the Gay Games.²⁰³

The implication of Brook’s assertion is that public lesbian communities like those documented in urban centres may have been useful and important to many people, but they were not necessary: rural lesbians found a way a way to connect if they wanted. Jane expresses similar sentiments, explaining, “I don’t think I thought in terms of finding someone who was lesbian, just somebody I found attractive, and you hope they find you

¹⁹⁹Janet, telephone interview by author, 29 May 2007.

²⁰⁰Yvette, interview by author, 18 May 2007.

²⁰¹Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

²⁰²Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

²⁰³Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

attractive too.”²⁰⁴ All of these explanations support the findings published in 1990 from a survey on lesbians’ experiences in St. John’s, Newfoundland, where “[o]nly one respondent [of thirteen] to the survey brought up the difficulty of finding a suitable lover given the smallness of the lesbian population.”²⁰⁵

Connection to a lesbian community would have made meeting potential partners easier for many women, especially for those living in small communities. However, lesbian communities did more than help single lesbians meet possible girlfriends; they could also provide safe and supportive environments in the face of societal exclusion. Describing the isolation that she felt when she first moved to Salt Spring, Robin makes a compelling case for the benefits of being part of a specifically *lesbian* community:

I find I’ll make friendships with women who are straight and I’ll get along fine with their husbands. And I’ll go to their place for dinner and that kind of thing. But I was always left out of their real social lives, because social lives are organized in terms of couples. And so if they were having all their couple friends, there was no place for me in that. So, I always kind of felt like I was living in the cracks of their lives...So it’s been nice to have a social network which is gay and where you can make relationships with other people without feeling like you’re going to be dropped when the serious, the real part of living comes along.²⁰⁶

This explanation is particularly important because it demonstrates how lesbian community was more than simply a dating pool; it was also a support network.

Another important, mythologized role of queer community is its ability to buffer, if not insulate, lesbians and gay men from homophobic violence. Even as theorist Shane Phelan destabilizes the very concept of community—preferring to see it as a process rather than a fixed, unchanging entity—she purports that one of lesbian community’s most important roles is to insulate “lesbians from hostility to their sexuality. That community is

²⁰⁴Jane Rule, interview by author, 1 February 2007.

²⁰⁵Sharon Dale Stone and the Women’s Survey Group, “Lesbian Life in a Small Centre: The Case of St. John’s,” *Lesbians in Canada*, ed. Sharon Dale Stone (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990), 103.

²⁰⁶Robin, interview by author, 4 June 2006.

the place or space (in a nongeographical sense) where it is ‘all right (or even better) to be a lesbian,’ where being a lesbian is simply not an issue.”²⁰⁷ Wayne Myslik argues that queer spaces “are generally perceived as safe havens from...discrimination and violence” and even though the gay men he interviewed acknowledged “the danger of heterosexist violence is greatest in queer spaces,” they still felt safest in such spaces.²⁰⁸ In the face of this mythology, rural areas are frequently typecast as more prejudiced, violent, and homophobic places, and their supposed lack of lesbian community as only exacerbating the problem by leaving gay women without any protection from rural queer-bashing. This presumption is not a new development, as demonstrated by the assertion in a 1972 *Body Politic* article: “In a smaller city the oppressive Presbyterian ethic of rural wasp society is inescapable.”²⁰⁹ Such assumptions prioritize rural homophobia over the very real experiences of anti-gay violence and threats that many lesbians experienced in the city, as well as disallow the possibility of comfort and integration that many lesbians felt with the non-gay members of their rural communities.

Safety was not a major concern for any of the women interviewed. Indeed, their most threatening experiences were linked to the city. When asked about the issues of safety and homophobia, Robin states, “It’s never been an issue here [on Salt Spring Island]. Nobody has ever said a word to me about being gay.”²¹⁰ She recalls two incidents on the Island in which homophobic slurs were used against her during the more than thirty years she has lived there, but she clearly did not feel threatened by them, nor did they construct Salt Spring as a violent or scary place for her as a lesbian. When asked about her safety while

²⁰⁷Shane Phelan, *Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 87.

²⁰⁸Wayne Myslik, “Renegotiating the Social/Sexual Identities of Places: Gay Communities as Safe Havens or Sites of Resistance?” *Bodyspace; Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Duncan (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 157, 166.

²⁰⁹Hugh Brewster, “The Non-Urban Gay Ghetto,” *The Body Politic* 2 (Jan/Feb 1972): 9.

²¹⁰Robin, interview by author, 4 June 2006.

living on the farm outside of Mission, Nym describes being scared of losing her job, but not fearing for her physical safety: “I always felt very safe on the land, at the farm. It was way far away from everything. It was a really long driveway. Nobody, nobody—you couldn’t see, you didn’t know it was there, and I always had dogs. So, I never had physical safety fears.”²¹¹ Even though she described the Fraser Valley as an intensely homophobic environment, Nym is pretty clear about not having any safety concerns; in fact, the remoteness of where she lived offered her protection that the city could not have provided.

The most violent or threatening experiences recounted by the narrators took place in the city. Having recalled a few problems with their neighbours’ children yelling “homo” at her and her partner, Janet says, “The only other times that I would be frightened would be in the 50s, in the bar when the raids [happened]. You never knew what was going to happen and if you were going to get hauled off to jail.”²¹² Brook “experienced overt homophobia here in this community [on Salt Spring Island]. Not attacks on my person physically, but small amounts on my property, and some verbal abuse. But it’s really been minimal in the thirty years I’ve been here, really, really minimal.”²¹³ Brook recalls several incidents from her time in Vancouver that made her feel unsafe. She recounts seeing her gay and lesbian friends committed to psychiatric wards while she was living on the outer fringe of Vancouver: “I had a friend who was in, in and out [of the psychiatric ward], for like three months and then two weeks, and always violence and suicide, and this was when I was in grade twelve.”²¹⁴ She also knew a few women “who had been in jail because they were

²¹¹Nym, interview by author, 28 March 2007.

²¹²Janet, telephone interview by author, 29 May 2007.

²¹³Brook, interview by author, 24 May 2007.

²¹⁴Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

lesbians.”²¹⁵ Because her mother threatened her with “doctors’ help if she found that I had not a healthy interest in girls,” Brook did not come out to her mother until she was twenty-one and she believed her mother would not be able to commit her.²¹⁶ Despite being publicly open about her sexuality throughout the province while travelling with the BCFW, Yvette’s scariest experience of homophobic violence happened in Vancouver, when she and her girlfriend were beaten up after being thrown out of their local bar for kissing. Although the members of the Lesbian Caucus sometimes received threats or had trouble finding a place to stay, Yvette thinks that she “was too stupid to have safety concerns.”²¹⁷

This is not meant to suggest that rural areas were free of homophobic violence or that no lesbians experienced Vancouver or Victoria as a comparatively safe space. Certainly urban safety would have been the experience of many gay women in British Columbia, and those women who suffered the most homophobia in their lives might be less inclined to share their histories.²¹⁸ However, the cities held their share of threats, and some women found safety in the rural parts of the province—sometimes even more than was available in the city. As Jean Brasher writes about the American context, “For those readers who don’t live in West Texas (a majority, I’m assuming), let go of your smugness. You may live in San Francisco or New York or Chicago, but you are no safer than I am.”²¹⁹ In fact, urban lesbians might be even more vulnerable.

²¹⁵Brook, interview by author, 24 May 2007.

²¹⁶Brook, interview by author, 24 May 2007.

²¹⁷Yvette, interview by author, 18 May 2007.

²¹⁸This was the case with one of the women who opted not to participate in this project because she wanted to put her negative experiences behind her.

²¹⁹Jean Brasher, “The Friday Night Bunch: A Lesbian Community in West Texas,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 9, no.1&2 (2005): 79.

Many of these women's urban experiences of violence and homophobia involve various forms of governmental powers such as the police and psychiatric hospitals, but the homophobia they experienced rurally typically came in the form of individual attempts at social control by other community members. This helps to explain why these women had very few instances of homophobia to report: by and large, these women described their relationships to the larger communities that they lived in as positive and integrated. In fact, many of them attributed their acceptance in their communities to the interdependence and forced interaction of a rural community, particularly one on an island. Paul Cloke and Jo Little argue:

One of the most relevant and important of the contradictions which have been shown to exist within contemporary rural society is that between the so-called "ideal" of the rural community (the warm, tight-knit, and accepting community being a central focus of contemporary constructions of rurality), and the recognition of difference.²²⁰

However, many of the narrators found a balance between these two extremes. They may have had divergent feelings about lesbian community, but almost all of them expressed finding value and actively participating in their local communities.

Jane's pragmatic assessment of the island she has lived on for the past three decades reveals that while she may have initially moved to Galiano as an escape from her busy city life and had little interest in making new contacts, she quickly became enmeshed in the community:

We all have to live in the same space. We all agree that we have to put out forest fires. And, there's an awful lot—because there aren't very many services here. Our fire department is entirely volunteer. We have volunteer ambulance drivers. If there's a power failure, everybody in the neighbourhood is trying to help everybody else. It doesn't really matter who you're sleeping with, or whether at night you drink too much. When you're in a circumstance like that...you have to help each

²²⁰Paul Cloke and Jo Little, "Conclusion: Marginality and Rural Others," *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalisation and Rurality*, ed. Paul Cloke and Jo Little (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 277.

other because there' no place else to turn. I think that's a very good thing. I think it teaches people, not to get along very well—I mean people have terrible rows here, in particular in the winter time when everybody is bored and looking for something to encourage the blood pressure or start the adrenaline rolling. So, I don't idealize the community, but I like the requirements of it.²²¹

These sentiments are reminiscent of ones she expressed nearly thirty years ago in 1979 in the pages of *The Body Politic*, when she wrote of Gabriola Island:

In such a place it is easiest to learn both the danger and necessity of visibility... Human beings tolerate what they understand they have to tolerate. Only visibility is instruction... In a city that "would rather not know," visibility is a harder business. The police enjoy protecting that ignorance, bolstering prejudice in raids on everything from steam baths to newspapers, providing lurid copy. People begin to think they don't have to tolerate that. Nothing as simple as a parade will change their minds. Only when a community knows that everywhere, in all circumstances, it is shared by gay people does it learn... that it must accept us as part of the political reality. If we stay invisible or withdraw into protective communities, we are dangerously disturbing the political balance on which we need to depend.²²²

It was the enforced interaction of a diverse array of people that Jane came to appreciate while living on the Island, rather than the insulation from the rest of the world that she initially sought. She sees interdependence of rurality not only as personally appealing, but also as playing a crucial role in facilitating greater acceptance of homosexuality in the broader society.

A similar sense of interdependence also shaped Brook's dealings with the Salt Spring Island population. She declares, "I'm hugely accepted in this community because that's the way this community is. Everybody knows that some day down the road, somebody's going to maybe be saving your life, or need your help, or be on a committee. You're too close to be separate."²²³ Brook's sentiments closely resemble those of a local historian of the Gulf Islands, Arthur Fielding Sweet, who asserts, "Islanders bend over backwards to get along

²²¹Jane Rule, interview by author, 1 February 2007.

²²²Jane Rule, "Stumps," *The Body Politic* 54 (July 1979): 20.

²²³Brook, interview by author, 24 May 2007.

with each other because we share a small space. We don't fight with our neighbours. Sooner or later—and usually sooner than later—we'll meet face-to-face at the post office or while waiting for the ferry. We curb our aggressiveness and hide our hostilities”²²⁴

Furthermore, because Brook owned a second-hand bookstore for many years, she had “a huge amount of contact with people on the Island, and often on a very intimate level. There were people who would come in there that just absolutely detested me, but they loved the store so they had to come in for the store. The barriers break down after a while.”²²⁵ In addition to her bookstore, Brook and her partner played in a local softball league when they first moved to Salt Spring. Brook was never interested in a lesbian separatist existence, characterizing her own community not as lesbian, but as “my personal family and my partner and her friends—some straight, some gay. I have kids in my life; I have old people in my life. There's all kinds of people in my life.”²²⁶

Robbie's experiences in Indian Arm during the 1970s also indicate a high level of acceptance by and integration into her local community. She and her partner socialized easily with heterosexual couples:

When there were get-togethers, we were included. It didn't feel odd or weird or whatever... In a community like that, people are not so judgemental. There were a few of us—period. There were just a few people there. We united to have company and for our mutual needs and social appreciation.²²⁷

This level of acceptance may have been related to the people who made up Indian Arm's population at the time. Robbie uses the examples of interracial couples and American war-resisters, who had fled the United States during the Vietnam War, to explain that “[i]t didn't

²²⁴Arthur Fielding Sweet, *Islands in Trust* (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan Books, 1988), 51.

²²⁵Brook, interview by author, 24 May 2007.

²²⁶Brook, interview by author, 1 December 2006.

²²⁷Robbie, telephone interview by author, 16 May 2007.

matter if you were different, because everybody was different anyway, in some way or other...People in glass houses don't throw stones. So...we didn't get any side-glances or anything."²²⁸ This loose alliance is affirmed by Yvette, who explains that rural lesbians' worlds "couldn't be that tight because you couldn't survive. They had to be a little bigger, so there was some interesting mixes of people: artistic communities, love communities, off the land, people opting out, war resisters coming in from the States."²²⁹

These connections to the local community were reflected by many of the other narrators, including those who also had strong ties to lesbian communities. While Mearnie says that her relationships with other lesbians are where the "pleasure" of her life has been, she is quick to clarify, "But then I had a lot of dancing friends. And my aunts and uncles—and I had a lot—ten on my mother's side."²³⁰ Mearnie, like most people, was part of a variety of communities: her extended family, her square-dancing friends, her team-mates on the many sports teams she played on, and her gay and lesbian friends who gradually migrated to Indian Arm. Both Brook and Janet had help from community members in building their respective houses. This is not to deny the ostracism and discomfort that some lesbians faced while living rurally, as Nym's experiences highlight. When Nym describes the Fraser Valley as a "really hellish place to live as a lesbian," she explains it was because the community's "historical roots are in a very fundamentalist Christian tradition," recalling how the local papers had weekly religious rants about how homosexuality was an abomination.²³¹

However, homophobia did not preclude the integration of lesbians into a rural community where people were "too close to be separate." As Yvette describes her place in the rural

²²⁸Robbie, telephone interview by author, 16 May 2007.

²²⁹Yvette, interview by author, 18 May 2007.

²³⁰Mearnie, interview by author, 5 June 2006.

²³¹Nym, interview by author, 28 March 2007.

community that she lived in part-time in Ontario after moving away from British Columbia: “They may shoot homosexuals, but we’re actually their queers.”²³² Homophobic beliefs may have permeated the local thinking, but the small and interdependent nature of the community facilitated the integration of lesbians into the community.

Just as their reasons for relocating often had little to do with sexuality, many of these narrators did not base their social networks explicitly on a shared sexual identity. Instead, they formed social connections with people from the general population of their rural communities. Furthermore, many of them had very positive, fruitful engagements with lesbian communities from which they benefited a great deal, and to which they were greatly attached. These connections were manifested in a diversity of ways, as both public and private networks, but their very existence is important, particularly in the face of the characterization of rural British Columbia as a lonely and hostile environment for lesbians. This depiction is best demonstrated by the following two examples. First is Tom Warner’s previously discussed use of a single story of isolation as representative of the Gulf Islands lesbian experience.²³³ Second is both M. Julia Creet’s and Becki Ross’s reference to a letter that the BCFW received in 1975 from northern British Columbia that referred to lesbians as “green slime who should go back to the bars where you came from.”²³⁴ Contrary to these portrayals, Brook, Jane, and Robin’s memories of all the lesbians they were connected with, Mearnie and Robbie’s descriptions of their lesbian parties in Indian Arm, and Nym and Yvette’s efforts to built lesbian community at Amazon Acres and throughout the province indicate that lesbian networks were very much in existence in rural British Columbia.

²³²Yvette, interview by author, 18 May 2007.

²³³Warner, *Never Going Back*, 171.

²³⁴M. Julia Creet, “A Test of Unity: Lesbian Visibility in the British Columbia Federation of Women,” *Lesbians in Canada*, ed. Sharon Dale Stone (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990), 193; Becki Ross, *The House that Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 30.

Moreover, on a personal level, these narrators were accepted by their local communities. The private nature of this acceptance and of many of the connections is much more difficult to locate than hate-filled letters to public organizations. Rural areas were not desolate, lonely places for all lesbians, but instead could be filled with a diverse range of fulfilling and supportive relationships. Their histories push historians of homosexuality to continue to diversify the spaces in which to consider queer communities and historians more broadly to consider what individuals seek from community and where they can find it.

Conclusion

According to Angelia R. Wilson, “The building of gay and lesbian ‘community’ [in the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s], or at least the political positing of a gay and lesbian identity, necessitated constructing a coherent story about our experience of marginalisation. Expressions of collective identity are stories told to ensure sameness – of deviant desire and of social exclusion.”²³⁵ This argument is incredibly useful in understanding not only how the migration archetype came to be, but also why it has maintained such resonance: metanarratives help establish a basis for community and political organization. However, such metanarratives bind and limit how we conceive of sexual identity, community, and history. A truly inclusive queer history must continually strive to recognize all points of diversion.

The archetype of urban migration may have served an important purpose for many people, but historians are now working on the crucial project of expanding queer historical subjects and experiences. Historicizing rural lesbian experiences is an integral part of such a project. Returning to Robin Metcalfe’s words from the introduction to this thesis, until we have imagined ourselves, we do not exist. The absence of rural lesbians in a significant manner in gay history helps to explain why popular representations and understandings of rural spaces continue to be those that exclude even the possibility of the existence of gay women outside of the city for anything more than a tortured, fleeting moment unless buffered by the seclusion of lesbian separatism.

²³⁵Angelia R. Wilson, “Getting Your Kicks on Route 66: Stories of Gay and Lesbian Life in Rural America, c.1950-1970s,” *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, ed. Richard Phillips, Diane Watt, and David Shuttleton (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 199.

These women's stories do not reveal to us *the* rural lesbian experience; they do not even reveal *the* British Columbian rural lesbian experience. Instead, the narratives push us to rethink our assumptions about where lesbians exist, what their needs and desires are, where they have moved and why, and what types of communities they have built. These women's histories are not about migrating to the city and participating in an urban bar culture, nor are they about a lesbian separatism that constructs a romanticized rurality. There are certainly points of overlap: Brook's, Janet's, and Robbie's participation in the bar culture, and Nym's and Yvette's participation in lesbian feminism connect them to the more established narratives of this era, but their rural experiences simultaneously complicate those narratives. As different as the experiences of the nine narrators may be, what they shared is an effort to forge lives for themselves outside of the city while negotiating lesbian lives, identities, and partners. That they did this over a period of time when discourses of heteronormativity permeated Canadian culture, and when burgeoning gay activism was urban-based, raises important questions for historians not only about lesbians, but also about how multiple identities are managed, life choices are made, and communities are constructed.

The life patterns of the nine narrators overwhelmingly support John Howard's supposition that circulation is an effective way of understanding queer movement. They also indicate that for many lesbians, the act of relocation, rather than the destination itself, is what is significant—that being away from one's family and childhood community had a greater affect than an urban setting. What is more, many of these women's experiences undermine the primacy of sexual identity as a factor in deciding where to live; many of them chose to settle rurally because of childhood connections to the country or because of urban dissatisfactions. They have shown that isolation can exist in the city, and that lesbian

networks existed in the country. Their lives demonstrate that the rural need not always be a place from which queers flee, but instead can be a chosen space.

Whether the narrators chose to live rurally because of their sexuality or for other reasons, most of them were part of a lesbian community, whether it was a private friendship circle, a public, political group, or a general awareness of the other gay women in their communities. Even those women uninterested in or without access to forms of lesbian community were also not necessarily isolated. The relationships that many of these narrators—including those with strong ties to lesbian communities—had with the general population of the communities in which they lived also belie characterizations of rural spaces as inherently more homophobic or lonely wastelands for gay people. Without romanticizing their rural locations as lesbian utopias, these women described gradually integrating into their communities, and, in fact, preferring those communities because of what they saw as geographically-enforced interdependence and interaction. These women were able to imagine and then forge lives for themselves as rural lesbians.

Their lives are not uniform stories of peace and acceptance in rural communities; many of them experienced periods of loneliness in the country. Yet that is where they chose to move and to remain, decisions that call into question the determining role sexuality played in their lives. Lesbianism is an important enough part of how these narrators define themselves to motivate them to participate in an oral history project on the subject; yet, for many of them, other factors drew them to specific regions or formed the basis of their communities. This is not an argument that sexuality does not matter, but an important caution that, as historians of sexuality, we cannot assume that it is always the most important factor—a lesson that is useful to all historians concerned with aspects of identity. Even when using these identities as the basis of our studies, we must be careful not to

automatically privilege them, but instead work to understand how individuals' multiple identities interact.

When asked about meeting other lesbians, Anne responds bluntly, "Sweetie, the world is swarming with us."²³⁶ What was straightforward to her has yet to be reflected in the queer history on provincial, national, and North American scales. While the field has been moving away from its initial urban domination for some time now, there is still very little work concerned specifically with lesbians and rurality. It is clear that there are many lesbian histories yet to be written. Several have suggested themselves in this project; studies of the BCFW's Lesbian Caucus, Amazon Acres, and Rubyfruit Ranch, as well as histories of lesbians in northern and interior British Columbia would diversify this province's lesbian history even further. Rather than a disappointing or immobilizing gap, this is an exciting opportunity to broaden lesbian history. While this project may not be a comprehensive history of all rural lesbians in British Columbia, it does suggest ways that we can begin to imagine rural lesbianism—ways that will prove helpful in tackling further histories. Rural lesbians are not only thinkable, but are complex and diverse, and are of great academic significance.

These women's narratives not only supplement the existing historical narratives of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, but also push academics and activists to use a broader lens when theorizing lesbianism. Accepting the assertion that "Lesbians Are Everywhere" is only the first step in theorizing and historicizing rural lesbians; it is exploring the nuances and specifics of lesbian lives, as demonstrated by these nine women's narratives, that does the crucial work of refining and expanding lesbian historical narratives and not simply accepting

²³⁶Anne, telephone interview by author, digital recording, Tahsis, Vancouver Island, British Columbia, 25 April 2007.

rural lesbians' experiences as either horrific or idyllic.

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