

THE PERSONAL IS HISTORICAL: THE IMPACT OF LESBIAN IDENTITY ON THE
SONOMA COUNTY WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND BEYOND

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By Emilie E. Roy

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ABSTRACT

Until recently, historical narratives of the contemporary U.S. Women’s Movement have focused primarily on urban centers such as New York or San Francisco. This scope obscures the nuances of the movement throughout the nation. In addition, the narratives tend to portray lesbian participants as separatists or cultural feminists. This is, in part, because lesbians did not always proclaim their sexual identity in every action they took. As a result, historians often label the past as ‘feminist’ rather than ‘lesbian.’ In order to re-frame the narrative, this thesis examines the margins of the past by using oral history to illuminate the lesbian impact on the women’s movement in Sonoma County, California. From 1970 until the late 1980s this non-urban geographic location was a hotbed for feminist culture and activism. This thesis explores the role that lesbians played in the county and focuses specifically on moments in time and space where their definitions, articulations, and negotiations of identity fueled the movement. This thesis draws on personal narrative to argue that identity is a fluid category that, when explored historically, reveals the impact that individual and communal conceptions of meaning had on experience and action.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of many people.

First, I would like to thank Dr. Michelle Jolly for serving as the chair for my thesis. Dr. Jolly has encouraged me throughout the masters program and the researching and writing process. From the very first day I set foot in her office with a grandiose plan for a thesis, she has mentored me through the exciting moments, the daunting moment, and finally, to the moment of completion...at least for now.

In addition, I would like to thank both Dr. Steve Estes and Dr. Don Romesburg for sitting on my committee and for continually challenging me to interrogate existing historical interpretations. Dr. Estes has been a valuable source of knowledge about gender history the oral history process. Dr. Romesburg has clarified the complexities of both feminist and queer theory time and again. I am extremely fortunate to have worked with such a supportive and knowledgeable committee.

I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the Lesbian Archives of Sonoma County for their willingness to work alongside me and guide me in my research. Thank you to the founders, Ruth Mahaney, Marylou Hadditt, Ann Neel, Tina Dungan, and Mary Kowatch for inviting me to their meetings and connecting me with women to interview. I would like to thank Pam Adinoff, Barbara Bochincki, Cristina Briano, Tina Dungan, Cheryl Dunn, Frances Fuchs, Robin Gail, Marylou Hadditt, Sheri Hoefling, Debra Kelly, Mary Kowatch, Molly Murphy MacGregor, Ruth Mahaney, Carolyn Metz, Nancy Moorhead, Morgan Stewart, Ann Neel, Trish Nugent, Phyllis Onstad, Mary Ruthsdotter, Cass Smith, Mary Williams, and J.J. Wilson for participating in the oral history interviews. This thesis would have never been possible without the help of these amazing women.

I am eternally grateful to my family for their continual support, both financially and emotionally. They have always believed that I would make it through, even when I did not. Finally, I thank Riley for his understanding and endless patience. For the past three years he has been my calm amongst the chaos.

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Prologue

This thesis grew out of the Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, which began at Sonoma State University as collaboration between Professor Michelle Jolly in the History department and former feminist activists from Sonoma County. About three years ago the former Projects Director at the National Women's History Project, (located in Santa Rosa, CA) contacted Dr. Jolly to see if she would organize a project to document the stories of feminist activists in this area so their achievements would not be lost. Seeing the project as a good opportunity for her students to connect directly with women's history, she agreed to take it on. From there the project grew...and grew...and grew.

As it turned out, Sonoma County was a hotbed for feminist activity in the 1970s and 1980s. The area brought together women from all different walks of life who desired equality and social change. These women worked hard to improve both their own lives and the lives of women in their communities. Part of the draw was that the university, Sonoma State College, as it was called at the time, had just recently opened. In the early 1970s Professor J.J. Wilson in the English department spearheaded an effort to build a Women's Studies program to allow young women to explore what gender meant, both historically and in their own lives. This ultimately altered the way they understood themselves and their future. In addition, Sonoma County women were impacted by the National Women's movement and began to organize for change in their communities. Eventually, a strong feminist culture developed in the area, inspiring women to establish more than 200 feminist organizations and coalitions that focused on a wide range of

issues, including politics, health, domestic abuse, child care, race relations, spirituality, and even women's history. As Dr. Jolly and her students continued to explore the local women's movement, it became apparent that this project illuminated the important role that grassroots activists played in the transformation of communities across the country.

I started working on the project in 2007. By that time a number of interviews had already been recorded, and Professor Jolly had been awarded a grant from the *California Stories Initiative* of the California Council for the Humanities. One of the requirements for the grant was to publicly present the research conducted. In order to complete the requirement, Dr. Jolly planned a gallery exhibit in the University Library for Fall 2008. During the 2008 spring semester, she offered a class on the History of Women's Activism, for which I served as the teaching assistant. As part of this class, students learned about women's activism throughout the history of the United States, but their assignments focused on Sonoma County Women's Activism. They had a chance to take on the role of a historian and help prepare a timeline of Sonoma County women's activism, delve into the local *Santa Rosa Press Democrat* newspaper, research the County Commission on the Status of Women annual reports, and conduct their own oral history interviews for the upcoming exhibit.

For the final exam for the course, the class invited all the women who had been interviewed thus far to a reception to display the work. The goal for the reception was to provide the women with a chance to collaborate in the analysis of the project in order to prepare for the exhibit. The participants were invited to add their memories to the timeline the students had worked on and comment on the newspaper project. Over 30 women showed up to the reception, and for two hours the former activists mingled with

students, commented on the project progress, and reunited with friends and acquaintances whom they had not seen in years. This event was a turning point for the project as it allowed for collaboration of meaning between the researchers and the interview subjects. This event inspired many women to start thinking about their own lives in a historical manner, and a few women expressed their concern about the lack of information on the impact of lesbians on the local movement. Dr. Jolly explained that the event was intended to identify gaps in the research in order to create a more complete gallery exhibit. In addition, many of the students had turned in their oral history interviews during the reception, so the timeline did not yet reflect the memories of the women they spoke with. Nevertheless, under the surface tension was growing as these women felt that their contributions were not only being left out but also completely wiped from the pages of history.

After leaving the reception, a group of lesbians hurt and worried that their history and achievements would be lost in the oral history project. They started to discuss how they could make sure to preserve their past. In order to do so, they decided to start their own coalition. Over the next few months, as the SCWOHP continued on, Ruth Mahaney and Marylou Hadditt founded the Lesbian Archives of Sonoma County (LASC). A few months after the reception, I was looking for original ephemera for the gallery exhibit, so I contacted Ruth Mahaney to find out more about lesbian activity in the local movement. When I spoke with her, she expressed concern once again about the project's lack of attention to lesbian activism. She also told me about the Lesbian Archives that she had developed with Marylou Hadditt, who later told me, "We all went to that pretty little reception with all the good food...and ohh...we we're invisible...on the way home we

kept talking about the [reception] in the car and by the time we got back home we decided to do something about it and we had a statement of purpose on what we intended to do.”¹ After listening to their concerns and discussing them with Dr. Jolly, I started to wonder why and how this tension had occurred. The goal was to document the stories of all women yet these women did not feel that their lives were reflected in our initial research. Seeing this as a fascinating and important research project, I decided to focus my thesis on lesbian activism in Sonoma County.²

In January 2008, I began working with the Lesbian Archives of Sonoma County to try and find answers to my research questions, which were: How did lesbians impact the Sonoma County women’s movement and the national movement? Was there a divide between straight and gay feminists in Sonoma County? Which organizations and coalitions were lesbians involved in? How did lesbian culture impact activism? When and why did lesbians come out? Over the past year I attended the LASC meetings, interviewed the founders, and observed the events. I also interviewed fourteen lesbians who were active in the women’s movement. While my initial goal was to uncover lesbian activism in Sonoma County, what I found was a gap in historical research on the

¹ Marylou Hadditt, interview by the author, 7 April 2008, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, Ca.

² A large part of this story is that action spurs actions. The oral history project led to the development of a gallery exhibit and a university course. This led to the reception, which inspired a group of women to document and evaluate their own past. The tension between the two projects led to my work with the Lesbian Archives. All of this culminated in a much more complete gallery exhibit that many of the members of the archives were satisfied with. In addition, this thesis developed out of this flow of action and led to a more nuanced Oral History project. By encouraging collaboration and keeping the lines of communication open, historians can arrive at a better understanding of how personal meaning and memory impact the picture of the past.

importance of identity, more specifically lesbian identity, in the master narratives of the history of the women's movement.

As I read histories of the contemporary women's movement, I noticed that, while many historians devote a section or a chapter to lesbians in the women's movement, they tend to portray them as separatists. These sections often focus on a gay/straight divide in the women's movement. Although this is part of the story, it obscures lesbian contributions beyond instances where they disclosed their sexual identity. That is . . .? Initially, I thought that the tensions encountered by the SCWOHP were a reaction to the divides between straight and gay feminists in the past. But soon I started to see that the project timeline tended to mirror the historical narratives that marginalized lesbians.

Through my interviews, I noticed that lesbians in Sonoma County were involved in many different areas of the women's movement. Although they identified as lesbians throughout their activism, they did not always call attention to their sexuality. Rather they understood lesbianism not only as a sexual preference, but also as a political statement. By embracing a lesbian identity, women privileged other women in all areas of their lives.³ Therefore, much of their activism was focused on benefiting all women. Although at the time lesbians did not necessarily label their actions as 'lesbian', as we look back on the time it is essential to decipher these actions in order to track the impact of sexual

³ Although this might be seen as a choice, many women believed that they were in fact embracing their natural sexual identity. Lesbian feminist theorists, such as Jill Johnston, argued that all women were actually lesbians. By connecting feminism and lesbianism, women could argue that the practice was not deviant, but rather the key to liberation. Therefore, the politics and the stakes were quite different than they are today. While today debates about gay politics tend to focus on nurture vs. nature, during this period women embraced lesbianism not as a 'choice' but rather as a commitment and as an acknowledgement of their consciousness of the underlying structures of oppression. See, Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973)

identity on the women's movement and beyond. The story outlined in the subsequent pages is an attempt to make sense of the issues encountered by the Sonoma County Oral History Project and to provide insight for the many feminist oral history projects to come.

Introduction

1969 was a pivotal year. In the months following Richard Nixon's succession to the presidency, patrons of a gay bar in New York city rioted against police, an American man walked on the moon, a half-million people packed into vans and traveled across the country to one of the biggest concerts of all time, Sesame Street premiered, and the United States held the first military draft since the Second World War. In this highly political and emotional moment, feminists across the country called attention to the multilateral oppression of women as they protested the Miss America Pageant, formed coalitions, and lobbied for legislative change. In this same year, Carol Hanish wrote her influential piece, "The Personal is Political," as a response to critics who argued that the feminist tactic of consciousness-raising was not political but rather therapeutic. Hanish argued back, "One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution."⁴ The mimeographed essay spread like wildfire through feminist communities across the United States and transformed the way women understood the political implications of their personal actions. Soon, the title of Hanish's work became a catchphrase for a generation of women who discovered a new understanding through the women's movement.

In the forty years since Hanish wrote her essay, her catchphrase has been used so often that it has almost become cliché. Additionally, it has come to represent a time when women focused inward to create a culture of feminism. This period has been deeply

⁴ Carol Hanish, "The Personal is Political" in Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt eds., *Notes from the Second Year Women's Liberation: Major Writings of the Radical Feminists* (New York: Radical Feminism, 1970).

criticized for detracting from the political realities of women's lives to encourage feminism as an identity rather than a struggle.⁵ Interestingly, in master narratives of the contemporary women's movement, it is in this period when historians discuss lesbians. One reason for this is that many lesbians called attention to their sexual identities in reaction to the Stonewall riots that occurred in the same year that Hanish coined her phrase. They connected their sexuality to the women's movement by arguing that their personal preferences were in fact political, just as motherhood, health, and beauty were political. Despite (or perhaps because of) the initial negative reaction of the mainstream women's movement, lesbians formulated their own understanding of feminism. Just a few years after 'the personal is political' caught on, lesbians coined their own catchphrase in response to Jill Johnson's 1973 book, *Lesbian Nation*. In order to connect sexual identity to the women's movement they argued, "Feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice."⁶ These two phrases, as often as they were used, and as trite as they may have become, serve as a jumping off point for this thesis.

⁵ Theorist bell hooks argues, "Feminism is neither a lifestyle or a ready-made identity. Diverting energy, from a feminist movement that aims to change society, many women concentrate on the development of a counter-culture, a woman-centered world wherein participants have little contact with men. Such attempts do not indicate a respect or concern for the vast majority of women who are unable to interrogate their cultural expressions with the visions offered by alternative, woman-centered communities." bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984), 28.

⁶ See Estelle Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and The Future of Women* (New York: Random House, 2002), 264. In 1973, theorist Jill Johnson wrote, "I really think the feminists basically were making a common complaint in the new terminological context of feminism... The solution has still not been posed within feminist theory. It can't be because feminism is not a solution. It's the complaint that got the movement going. When feminists find a solution they'll be Gay/Feminists. Until then they've got the best problem around and that's the man. Feminism is a struggle terminology, concerning women at odds with the man. Since women have always been at odds with the man feminism is the collective articulated expression of women's

This thesis is an intersectional study of the impact of identity on action. It is situated between feminist, lesbian, and queer history but does not easily fit into any of these categories.⁷ Identity can be defined in many ways; however, for the purpose of this thesis I posit that it is the way that an individual understands herself in opposition to those and the world around her. Identity is therefore contingent on space and time and fluid in nature.⁸ Rather than just documenting the experiences of activists, I use ‘the personal is political’ as a paradigm for my historical inquiry. To do so, I trace the flow of identity formation, articulation, and negotiation by lesbians in the contemporary women’s movement. This is an attempt to locate the history between the “theory” of feminism and the “practice” of lesbianism. In essence, I ask: What was lesbian identity? How did lesbians present this identity? What was it for? How did it change the outcome of

demeaned status.” Jill Johnson, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 173-174.

⁷ This formulation of intersections is borrowed from Ann Cvetkovich, who states that her book “lies between the queer and the lesbian, not quite occupying either category comfortably. Its cultural cases and sites can be described as queer, however using that term alone does not account for the ways in which many of them are specifically marked as lesbian. Yet naming as my focus lesbian culture does not quite do justice to what are frequently the queer ways in which they occupy that culture.” 10-11. Like Cvetkovich’s work, this thesis does not fit into specific lesbian, feminist, or queer scholarship for it encompasses and rejects all these categories. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian in Public Cultures*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 10-11.

⁸ This definition is derived from feminist and queer theories that present identity as a category of analysis. For example, Juana Maria Rodriguez explains, “Identity is slippery stuff, the practices through which subjects construct identity are never singular. We move and speak in ever shifting contexts of meaning.” Juana Maria Rodrigues. *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive spaces*. (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 5-8. In addition, Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor argue that, “Feminism is more than gender ideology: it is a collective identity...Fearing an essentialist bias of identity...many critics tend to be weary of organizing on the basis of identity. But...it allows an understanding of feminism as a political identity that is constantly negotiated and revised.” Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, “Forging Feminist Identity in an International Movement: A Collective Identity Approach” *Signs* (Vol 24. No. 2, 1999), 363-365.

women's lives and the social movement? Although these questions complicate the past, they clarify the personal meaning that individuals derived from a social movement while they simultaneously infuse that movement with meaning. The influential women's historian and feminist theorist, Joan Wallach Scott argued,

Experience is not a word we can do without...It serves as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, of claiming knowledge that is 'unassailable.' Given the ubiquity of the term, it seems to me more useful to work with it, to analyze its operations, to re-define its meaning. This entails focusing on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive nature of 'experience' and on the political construction...The study of experience, therefore, must call into question its originary status in historical explanation. This will happen when historians take as their project *not* the reproduction and transmission of knowledge said to be arrived at through experience, but the analysis of the production of that knowledge itself.⁹

Through the pages of this thesis, it is my goal to adhere to Scott's call to analyze the production of knowledge and the formation of self and community, in order to re-cast the narrative of the past.

Typically, historians discuss the connection between lesbians and the women's movement in two different areas of scholarship: in narratives of the women's movement, and in narratives of lesbian and gay history. In both analytical contexts, historians pay ample attention to the role of lesbians in the movement; however, they portray them as separatists or cultural feminists, thus obscuring the true impact of lesbians.

In narratives of the women's movement, historians tend to talk about lesbians only when lesbians publicly disclose their sexual identity. Most notably, this occurs in the discussion of the "Lavender Menace." In the chapters or sections on lesbian feminism, historians almost always begin with a narrative about the divide between straight and gay

⁹ Joan Wallach Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 797.

feminists during the late 1960's in response to Betty Freidan's accusation that lesbianism was a 'lavender herring' for the women's movement, thus lesbians were a 'lavender menace.' They explain that angry and hurt lesbians organized a protest at the 1969 *Congress to Unite Women* and presented the influential "Woman Identified Woman" manifesto in which they argued that lesbianism was essential to the practice of feminism.¹⁰

Historians conclude that in response to the division with the mainstream women's movement, lesbians created their own separatist form of feminism. For example, Ruth Rosen writes, "The gay-straight split fragmented 'the sisterhood,' creating various kinds of hierarchies that excluded many women. The emphasis on sexual orientation scared some women fearful of unfamiliar and unconventional relationships. On the other hand, the rise of lesbian feminism infused the movement with new ideas and theories that helped feminists—and later scholars—to consider the social and cultural construction of gender, as well as the biological nature of sex."¹¹ Like Rosen, other historians also mark the conception of lesbian feminism as both divisive and influential for the women's movement. However, the over-arching narrative privileges the divisions and portrays lesbian contributions as cultural in nature. For instance, Flora Davis argues, "In the late 1970s, a second wave of lesbian separatism arose and was primarily oriented to the women's counterculture. The women of this second wave weren't quite as political; they

¹⁰ For example see Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America since 1960* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 263, Winifred D. Wandersee, *On The Move: Women in America in the 1970s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 64-66, Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 167-170, and Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of the Women's Movement* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 88.

¹¹ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 175.

were chiefly interested in creating their own space.”¹² As this thesis reveals, the activity that is labeled lesbian during the period may seem ‘less political’ to the outside world or to researchers, but in reality, lesbians were involved in many areas where they were very political. They did not however, always label their actions “lesbian.” In addition, lesbians understood the creation of women-only space to be political because it provided them with a haven where they could transform ideology into action. Therefore, building a counter-culture was political in it’s own right.

Although historians often discuss lesbians in the context of divisions, they do attempt to account for the impact that lesbians had on the women’s movement. Rosen explains that, “Lesbian feminists contributed a disproportionate amount of dedication and energy to the movement. . . . All over the country, lesbians sustained shelters for battered women, rape crisis hotlines, and health clinics used by women who wouldn’t have known the difference between NOW and The Furies, but welcomed the refuge and services they received.”¹³ Similarly, Estelle Freedman writes,

Lesbians created within North America and European women’s movements a positive, even celebratory, alternative space in which they met, organized, and explored sexual desires. Their separate culture nourished not only lesbians but any women who felt comforted by women-only space.¹⁴

These histories credit lesbians with enhancing the women’s movement, but this important point is often overshadowed by the initial focus on divisions and separatism.

Furthermore, the discussion of lesbian contribution is marginalized into sections or

¹² Davis, *Moving the Mountain*, 271. Wandersee also framed women’s space as a cultural institution. She wrote, “The woman-centered consciousness in general, and lesbianism in particular, had a creative impact upon American culture that encompassed feminism but went beyond it to the mainstream culture in the areas of art, music, literature, and film.” Wandersee, *On the Move*, 69.

¹³ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 175.

¹⁴ Freedman, *No Turning Back*, 265.

chapters about lesbian feminism. While this may be an attempt to highlight lesbians, it creates a skewed picture of the past, for the only time sexual orientation is illuminated is when a woman publicly announces her lesbian identity. Therefore, the lesbian vanguard falsely represents the history of all lesbians involved with the women's movement.

Scholars who study lesbian history refer to the gay-straight divide but tend to place the focus on the lesbian-separatist ideology that grew out of both the gay rights and women's movements. In the book *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, historian Lillian Faderman explains, "There were probably more lesbians in America during the 1970s than any other time in history because radical feminism had helped redefine lesbianism to make it almost a categorical imperative for women truly interested in the welfare and progress of other women."¹⁵ The number of lesbians was due to a re-definition of what the term meant. Instead of being a purely personal preference, feminism allowed lesbians define their sexuality as a political stance to privilege women in all areas of their lives. This ideology inspired both women who were aware of their sexual preference and women who had never before considered a gay lifestyle to come out in masse. There is no denying that this was a huge shift for both feminists and lesbians alike, and mainstream lesbian histories do a particularly good job of portraying this as a triumph for lesbians in the moment.¹⁶

¹⁵ Lillian Faderman. *Odd Girls And Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in 20th Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 207.

¹⁶ See Margaret Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1992), Lillian Faderman. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Arlene Stein, *Sex and Sensibilities: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), Annamarie Jagose, *Lesbian Utopics* (New York: Routledge, 1994), and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Yet as the narratives continue, historians increasingly associate lesbian-separatism with the rise of cultural feminism. By the late 1980's when the majority of the over-arching lesbian histories were written, cultural feminism was declining and many viewed it as the cause for internal divisions and feminist backlash. Therefore, historians and theorists continually downplay the accomplishments of lesbian feminists and emphasize their connection with the feminist-culture. Historians who write about lesbians, such as Faderman, Kennedy, and Davis argue that cultural feminism promoted an essentialist view of women that at times overlooked differences of class or race.¹⁷ Thus, lesbians become the proprietors of an essentialist movement that pitted women against one another. This not only casts lesbians in a negative light, but it also assumes that all lesbian activists were white upper class women. In addition, this framework also assumes that lesbian feminism died out in the late 1970s because it was no longer relevant to the movement. For instance, Faderman suggests, "The woman-identified women who hoped to create Lesbian Nation in the 1970s failed in their main goal... a goal born of excessive idealism... Their failure was inevitable not only because of their unrealistic notions, but also because, like most true believers, they had little capacity to compromise their individual visions."¹⁸ By focusing on woman-centered culture as the provenance of lesbians, Faderman and her counterparts miss the political significance of safe space. In addition, they also obscure lesbians who labeled their action feminist rather than constantly calling attention to their sexual identity.

¹⁷ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 249-252, Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 13, and Arlene Stein, "Sisters and Queers: The Decentering of Lesbian Feminism" *Socialist Review* 22 (1) (1992): 33-55.

¹⁸ Faderman. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 243-244.

Both of these analytical frameworks depict a picture of history that is not necessarily wrong. In many cases there were divisions between straight and gay feminists. Similarly, lesbian feminism and cultural feminism often went hand in hand. However, the narratives tend to obscure lesbian contribution beyond the schisms. Therefore, the frameworks should be seen as starting points for historical inquiry. This thesis is not an attempt to discredit their work, or even challenge the accuracy of their words. For it is true that there were divides between gay and straight feminists and lesbian vanguards did pave the way for the inclusion of sexuality in the women's movement. However, there is an underlying layer of history that when revealed, not only adds to our picture of the period but completely changes the medium through which we conceptualize it.

In recent years, a handful of historians have taken the initial steps to address the impact of lesbians beyond the gay/straight divide and cultural feminism. To do so, the majority focus on non-urban locations and rely on personal testimony.¹⁹ Using oral history as a tool, historians reveal the way that lesbians participated in and transformed women's movements across the country. As a result of her research, historian Susan K. Freedman posited that the majority of feminist and lesbian history ignores what she terms

¹⁹ See Trisha Franzen, "Differences and Identities: Feminism in the Albuquerque Lesbian Community," *Signs* 18 (1993), Stephanie Gilmore and Elizabeth Kaminski, "A Part and Apart: Lesbian and Straight Activists Negotiate Identity in a Second-Wave Organization," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19 (2007), Becky L. Ross. *The House that Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), and Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp "Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism," *Signs* 19 (1993).

as a “politics of location.”²⁰ She argues that the literature surrounding the women’s movement avoids geographical differences to create a unilateral narrative that disregards the nuanced differences in feminist action across the nation.

Freedman’s concept of a politics of location has inspired other scholars to look at underrepresented stories on local levels in order to contest homogeneous national narratives. Laurel A. Clark, for example, focused her research on the feminist community in Baltimore in order to question the prevalence of the gay/straight divide. She explained that, “this split occurred to different degrees in different places, and it did not necessarily mean a total separation...It is important that the sustained links are remembered alongside the divisions, particularly as a challenge to the way identity politics has framed this history.”²¹ Clark illuminates the way that individual narratives diverge from the master narrative of second wave feminism. As a result oral history has the power to upset the binary nature of historical interpretation in order to reveal alternate interpretations of the past. Clark concludes that, “...including many layers of identity and the networks of relationships that engender community and inspire social movements can put to rest the divisive insistence that one must choose one identity under which to stand.”²² In this thesis, I combine Freedman’s notion of a politics of location and Clark’s call to include the layers of identity, in order to argue that oral history allows individuals to recount their personal past, communicate the way they defined and articulated their identity, and explore themselves as historical actors. This reveals that identity is an ever-changing

²⁰ Susan K. Freedman. “From Lesbian Nation to the Cincinnati Lesbian Community: Building Towards a Politics of Location.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9 (2000), 140.

²¹ Laurel A. Clark. “Beyond the Gay/Straight Divide: Socialist Feminists in Baltimore” *National Women’s Studies Association Journal* 19 (2) (2007): 2.

²² Ibid.

category that, when explored historically and geographically, complicates the linear narrative of the past. This not only furthers the understanding of lesbians in local movements, but more importantly, it alters the historical comprehension of the entire women's movement.

My research suggests that the complex way that lesbians in Sonoma County, California defined and articulated their identities in response to feminism fueled a countywide effort for social change. In this process, lesbians negotiated and adapted their identities in multiple ways depending on the context of the situation. An exploration of negotiation reveals a history of disclosure that is often hidden from over-arching narratives. Furthermore, this exploration allows us to pinpoint the instances when lesbians shifted their priorities and harnessed their previous definitions and articulations of identity for gay rights. This goes beyond the argument that cultural feminism led to the decline of action, in order to suggest that in fact, that it engender a coalition of lesbians with the wherewithal and the knowledge to politicize a community and cultivate action for the advancement of gay liberation.

Sonoma County was a hot bed for feminist activity from the late 1960s until the early 1990s. As such it provides a unique opportunity to examine the margins of the master narratives of both second wave feminist activism and lesbian history, both geographically and demographically. However, you won't find Sonoma County mentioned in the historical scholarship on the contemporary women's movement. Perhaps you might find a quick note that the idea for Women's History Month originated in the "North Bay Area", but for the most part the master narrative of second wave feminism focuses on urban centers, as Freedman pointed out. Just one-hour drive north of

San Francisco, the physical location of Sonoma County brought together like-minded women from all walks of life who desired equality and worked together to improve women's lives. Within the county, they formed a political community with the desire to find safe space to express their concerns, needs, and desires. This conceptual space gave way to a feminist movement that both reflected and diverged from national politics.

In order to grasp the complexity of the impact of lesbian identity on the women's movement Sonoma County, I conducted a series of seventeen oral history interviews with fifteen women who lived in the county and self-identified or worked with lesbians in between 1970 and 1988. In addition, I draw from over forty interviews conducted by the Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project with both straight and gay former feminist activists.²³ Finally, I examine both published and private archival material to supplement the recollections of former feminist lesbian activists.²⁴

The majority of women I interviewed reside in Sonoma County; however two moved from the county since the 1980s. They ranged in age from fifty four to eighty

²³ The Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project started in 2006 as collaboration between Dr. Michelle Jolly in the History department at Sonoma State University, and former feminist activists in the county. Funded by grants from California Council on the Humanities and Sonoma State University, the project aims to collect the personal memories of participants of the women's movement in order to archive the importance of feminist activity in Sonoma County. So far Sonoma State students have conducted over sixty interviews. Currently the interviews and transcriptions are housed at the Sonoma State University History Department Office. However, in the future they will be donated to the Regional Oral History Office at the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, California and to the Lesbian Archives of Sonoma County. LASC is currently housed at the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco, CA.

²⁴ I use this term in opposition to 'lesbian feminist' in order to accomplish two things. First, this is to clarify that I am talking about individuals and not theory. Both Franzen and Clark also use this terminology for this purpose. Second, I use this term to oppose the notion that women were first lesbian and then feminists. By turning the terminology on its head, I hope that the reader will stop to think about their own pre-conceived notions about lesbians, feminism, and the relationship between the two.

years old. Fourteen of the women defined themselves as lesbians in their youth, while two women identified as heterosexual but worked alongside lesbians. Thirteen women still identify as lesbians today and one woman entered into a straight relationship years after her lesbian partner passed away. The women I spoke with were all Caucasian women, reflecting the majority of the Sonoma County Women's movement. However, as Debra Kelly so eloquently stated, "If you don't look around, you can say, yes, they're mostly white and then you just take a little scratch under the surface and you find out, 'Well, yes, I'm mostly white but actually my family's from Puerto Rico,' or 'Yes, I'm mostly white but both of my parents are Chicano.'"²⁵ Every woman I interviewed was involved in the women's movement in Sonoma County in one way or another. Some were more involved in the cultural aspects while others shifted between social activities and politics. This sample of women is not intended to represent the entirety of the feminist lesbian community in Sonoma County, but rather to serve as a starting point for inquiry.²⁶

This thesis is heavy on personal memory. Although memory is perhaps not the most reliable source, it does reveal something that newspapers, documents, charts, and figures cannot. It reveals the meaning that an individual placed on a moment in time. In addition, it reveals the impact of identity on the flow of action. In fact, by shifting our historical focus to memory, rather than facts and dates, we can understand how an

²⁵ Debra Kelly, interview by the author, 15 April 2008. Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

²⁶ This is a snowball sample of lesbians in Sonoma County, meaning that I started off with a small list of names. As I met with women they put me in contact with other former activists in the community, and from there the project grew. In addition, I examined archival documents and inquired about women listed in newspapers, pamphlets, and on the backs of photographs. Some I was able to interview; others I have yet to find.

individual, a group, or a society arrived at the present. If we define history not as an accurate depiction of the past, but rather an exploration into the construction of present meaning, we free ourselves from the limitations of overarching narratives and linear timelines to explore the reasons why individuals formed their personal and communal identities and how this impacted experience. In an article on historical memory, historian David Thelen asserts, “Even more intriguing than the fresh perspectives that the study of memory can throw on particular topics are the new ways that the study can connect separate points on the spectrum. By directing the same questions to different topics, the study of memory opens fascinating possibilities for synthesis. The same questions about the construction of memory can illuminate how individuals, ethnic groups, political parties, and cultures shape and reshape their identities—as know to themselves and others.”²⁷ Likewise, this thesis interrogates the construction and flow of identity in order to comprehend the interaction between feminist history, lesbian history, and queer history.

Although the study of memory has its flaws, it liberates us to understand the way social actors created meaning in their own lives and in turn impacted others to alter their understanding of themselves. Nevertheless, the memory of an individual can sometimes silence the memory of others. In the introduction to an anthology of memoirs from feminist all stars, editors Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow state, “There will

²⁷ David Thelen, “Memory and American History,” *The Journal of American History* 75 (4) (1989): 1118 The study of historical memory presents a new way of understanding the past. For more on the topic see John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton, University Press, 1994), Alison Landberg *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2004), and Alun Munslow, “Why Should Historians Write about the Nature of History (Rather Than Just Do it)?” *Rethinking History* 11 (4) (2007).

always be unbridgeable space between the story of one and the story of the many; highlighting one memory often casts another in a shadow.”²⁸ Nevertheless, they argue that the personal accounts in fact preserve the nuances of the past and reject historical amnesia. They proclaim that their book “stands against historical forgetting.”²⁹ Likewise, this thesis takes this stand in order to analyze memory to understand a moment when lesbian energy and lesbian identity paved the way for social change, both for women’s liberation and gay rights.

Tracing the flow of identity production and performance projects the tangled web of the past into the present. This allows us to better understand how personal conceptions of meaning are paramount in the narrative of experience. In order to grasp this concept, my thesis focuses on places in time and space where lesbians redefined the way they understood themselves and the world around them. Since identity is so individualized, it is nearly impossible to represent the way that every lesbian activist defined herself. However, as I conducted my interviews I found that there were shared instances that these women remembered as turning points in their lives. For the purposes of my thesis I call these “identity moments.” Each of the following chapters delves into a moment where lesbians redefined, articulated, and negotiated both their personal and communal identity. However, my study is not all-encompassing, and there are many different identity moments. I selected these particular moments because the women I interviewed emphasized their importance. Instead of clarifying a hegemonic narrative, these identity moments complicate the story in order to present a more nuanced view of the past. My

²⁸ Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow, eds. *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women’s Liberation* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 23.

²⁹ Ibid.

concept of an identity moment is similar to what feminist theorist Juana Maria Rodriguez describes as “spaces of dissension.” She states, ““The sites I have selected for analysis are not to be read as exceptional or unique instances of these contradictory spasms that yield new forms of knowledge; spaces of dissension sprout everywhere. My goal is to document the process through which these moments of rupture are articulated and mobilized.”³⁰ Similarly, for different individuals identity moments occur at different times and in different location. My selection does not privilege one moment over another, but rather to use these particular moments as an example of how to twist the traditional historical format in order to analyze the production of meaning and the resulting action.

In chapter one, I look at the shift in the definition of lesbian identity in the early 1970s. To do so I examine the way that women explored the concept of sexual identity in a course at Sonoma State College titled, “Woman-Identified Woman”. Through this course many women adopted a lesbian identity as both a personal and political statement. This shift in identity was significant because women decided to devote every part of their lives to other women. This moment transformed the students as well as the women’s studies academic program and in turn inspired other women to re-evaluate their own lives.

Chapter two examines the growth of women-centered community in Sonoma County. I focus specifically on the way that women combined forces, re-defined their personal and communal identities, and articulated themselves to the community. To illustrate this I examine *Runes*, the first Sonoma County women’s newspaper, as an identity nexus. The identities of the who ran the paper, contributed to the paper, and read

³⁰ Juana Maria Rodriguez. *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices and Discursive Spaces*, 9.

the paper impacted the content, and in turn the paper inspired re-negotiation of the understanding of self and community. The integrative and multi-layered aspects of the paper are representative of the county as a whole.

Whereas chapters one and two focus on specific moments that can be tracked chronologically, chapter three is a bit more abstract. This chapter focuses on moments where lesbians negotiated the public presentation of their identity by focusing on places where lesbians chose not to disclose their sexuality. Although at times lesbians closeted themselves as a survival tactic, at other times they did so as a political tactic to promote feminist ideology. This chapter focuses on the political reasoning behind disclosure to illustrate why historians often discuss lesbians only when they call attention to their sexuality despite the fact that participated in many areas throughout the movement.

Chapter four depicts a shift in personal and communal conceptions of identity. It differs from the previous chapters as it focuses on the 1978 Briggs Initiative to ban homosexuals and supporters of gay rights from teaching in public schools in California. I argue that this statewide historical moment caused lesbians in Sonoma County to re-evaluate their identities as both women and members of the gay community. Many chose to outwardly disclose their sexual identities in order to fight against the proposition. For many lesbians this was the first time they organized for legislative change based on sexuality rather than gender. Thus, this moment served as a turning point for lesbians in Sonoma County.

The final chapter focuses on ways lesbians shifted their identities in the aftermath of the Briggs initiative and the tragic death of Harvey Milk. In order to negotiate their political and personal identities, lesbians formed lesbian-specific organizations and

coalitions to fight for women's rights and gay rights. This period is often understood as lesbian separatism, but in Sonoma County it was an influential step in bridging lesbians with gay rights. I also argue that lesbians leveraged their previous activism to change the face of the gay community. This chapter demonstrates how a history of identity shed light on the flow of meaning in social movements. Instead of casting this period as apolitical or as the decline of feminism, I show that lesbians were in the midst of negotiating, re-defining, and blending their understanding of their individual and communal identity in order to continue in their fight against oppression.

I conclude with an epilogue that considers the oral history process itself as an identity moment. This drives home the fact that identity is a continually fluid category. Even in the present, as individuals recount their own past they re-define their position. In turn oral history not only serves as a tool for historical preservation but also as a force that inspires community and action, amongst former feminist lesbian activists.

Chapter 1: “Oh, My God, That Might Be Me!”—Trying on Lesbian Identity on the College Campus

In 1973, Pam Adinoff moved from Southern California to Sonoma County to attend the newly opened Sonoma State College. During her second semester she enrolled in a course titled, “Woman-Identified Woman,” taught by Ann Neel, a professor in the Women’s Studies department. Going into the class she considered herself a straight woman; however, the content of the course challenged her to re-evaluate her sexual identity. During one of the class meetings, Ann Neel invited a panel of “out” lesbians to speak. Adinoff remembered this specific moment as a turning point in her life. She explained, “I sat at the very back row of the auditorium and I was just horrified and shocked and kind of in awe, at the same time thinking, ‘Oh, my god, that might be me!’ I didn’t identify with them totally because the women up there didn’t look like me necessarily, but what they talked about...feelings for another women, being attracted or being drawn to other women. I realized my whole life that my friends were women...and there was a special person [a woman] that I would have done anything for.”³¹ Soon after the class Adinoff began the process of coming out as a lesbian. Adinoff was just one of the many women who redefined their personal identities in reaction to the Women’s Studies courses at Sonoma State College.

The Woman Identified Woman course was particularly influential because Neel presented lesbianism as not only a personal choice but also as an important to the success of women’s liberation. The class provided women who already identified as lesbians an

³¹ Pam Adinoff, interview by the author, 17 April 2008, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

opportunity to publicly discuss their sexual identity while also introducing straight women to the idea of lesbianism as a political statement. This opened the door to a safe space where lesbians and straight women could openly discuss the personal and communal meaning of sexual identity. The course encouraged students to privilege women in all areas of their lives and therefore was a defining moment for the Sonoma County Women's Movement.

In 1973, when the Woman Identified Woman course was first offered, the national women's movement was in the wake of a turbulent period as it faced internal division.. In 1969, the gay community changed drastically after the Stonewall Riots in New York. The riots began after police raided a known gay bar in Greenwich Village and outraged patrons fought back instigating a two-day riot. Prior to this point, homosexuals normally complied during police raids out of the fear of being publicly ridiculed. The riots mark a point where the oppression outweighed the fear and a community of people joined together to demand justice. During the following days and weeks people protested and formed organizations to rally support. Stonewall sent a clear message that the time for change had come and gay activists called for homosexuals to "come out" in mass in order to create a visible political community.³²

Lesbian members of the women's movement heard these calls and asked for support from feminist organizations like The National Organization for Women because they felt that oppression due to gender was inherently connected to oppression due to sexuality. However, the women's rights movement was not quite ready to embrace the

³² For more on Stonewall see, David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), Nicholas C. Edsall, *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003).

lesbian cause. NOW's focus was on women's equality in the public sector, and the members worried that the movement would lose momentum and credibility if it took on what they saw as private issues. Imbedded in this response was a deep fear of lesbian baiting that stemmed from first wave feminist activism. The tactic of lesbian baiting accuses women of lesbianism in an attempt to control her behavior. Some lesbians understood the fear and sided with straight women, but others argued that submitting to lesbian baiting permitted the oppression of all women. In an attempt to address the growing issue, NOW distanced itself from lesbians by skirting the issue and even asking some members to resign. NOW's president, Betty Freidan called the lesbian issue a "lavender herring" and lesbians a "lavender menace." Her word choice sparked a heated debate over the place of lesbianism in the women's movement. As long time supporters of NOW, many lesbians were hurt, angry and disappointed.³³

In response, lesbians joined together and organized a demonstration for a 1970 event ironically entitled, The Congress to Unite Women. During the opening program they ascended the stage, wearing purple t-shirts with the phrase "lavender-menace" across the front. They demanded the microphone and read a manifesto entitled, *The Woman-Identified-Woman*. The piece publicly called for women to pay attention to the exclusion of lesbians from the women's movement. The authors described lesbianism not only as a sexual choice but also as a political action, and they argued that lesbians were the ultimate feminists because they chose to privilege women in all areas of their lives. In conclusion, the Lavender Menace argued that lesbianism was essential to women's liberation. After the conference two members of the Lavender Menace, Rita Mae Brown

³³ Davis, *Moving the Mountain*, 221-225.

and Charlotte Bunch, founded the Radical Lesbians to continue to promote the idea of lesbian feminism. In the journal published by the organization, Charlotte Bunch wrote, “Woman-identified lesbianism is more than a sexual preference; it is a political choice. It is political because relationships between men and women are essentially political: they involve power and dominance. Since the lesbian actively rejects that relationship and chooses women, she defies the established political system.”³⁴ The idea that sexuality was directly related to gender and therefore a political choice spread throughout the country and encouraged some feminists to re-evaluate their own biases and even their own sexual identity.³⁵

While women debated the lesbian issue on the national level, Sonoma County women were in the process of building a local movement. In 1970, J.J. Wilson, a new professor in the English department at Sonoma State College, attended a Modern Language Association conference where she heard Adrienne Rich, Tillie Olson, and Audre Lorde speak. These three women were all poets and theorists on the cutting edge of feminist theory at the time.³⁶ Their words inspired Wilson to take action when she returned to Sonoma State. She recalled, “I came back fired up all right, I wanted to teach

³⁴ Charlotte Bunch, “Lesbians Revolt” in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, ed. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2003): 83.

³⁵ Gilmore and Kaminski, *A Part and Apart*, 96.

³⁶ All three of these women were influential in the women’s movement; however they were not directly involved in the mainstream feminist movement of the period. Rich and Lorde were African Americans, lesbians, and feminists and wrote about the challenges of juggling all three identities. Olsen was an older feminist, born just after women gained the right to vote, so she lived in between first and second wave feminism. See Susan Sheridan, “Adrienne Rich and the Women’s Liberation Movement: A Politics of Reception,” *Women’s Studies* 35 (2006): 17-45, Audre Lorde, *Conversations with Audre Lorde* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), and Deborah Rosenfelt, “From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition,” *Feminist Studies* 7 (3) (1981): 371-406.

a course about women writers. I had prepared this presentation—this sales pitch—for my department...I think I taught [the course] that summer.”³⁷ Wilson met with students on and off campus to discuss the presence of women in literature and history as well as the connection to their own lives. By 1971, the history, English, anthropology, and psychology departments had introduced courses specifically about women. The courses were extremely popular, and by 1972 students and professors worked to create a Women’s Studies department. The department allowed young women to explore what gender meant both historically and in their own lives, and it ultimately altered the way they understood their future. Looking back on the time, J.J. Wilson stated, “I really credit Sonoma County and Sonoma State with giving us the room to grow feminism.”³⁸ Many of the women interviewed recalled that the courses they took and the people they met in the Women’s Studies department had a huge impact on their lives.³⁹

The department not only educated women, but it also empowered them by inviting students to be a part of the decision-making process. Faculty encouraged students to participate by teaching classes, attending meetings, and serving on the department board. Professors and students worked together to build the program and in the process both groups developed a new way of understanding their lives. Susan Teller recalled, “Sonoma State gave an empowerment to women, [especially] to the gay women, who were involved in [women’s activism] but never had a voice before... we created it, and

³⁷ J.J. Wilson, interviewed by Sean Malone, 8 May 2006, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See interviews by the author with Molly Murphy MacGregor, Tina Dungan, Pam Adinoff, Mary Kowatch, and Mary Williams.

so, we breathed life into it and it breathed life into us.”⁴⁰ The department was a launching pad for feminist thought in Sonoma County and it empowered women and inspired a feminist campus community. Women who were aware of the feminist movement on the national level found a space where they could personally get involved. The students and faculty worked to create a safe environment for all women, which, as Teller points out, empowered lesbians to disclose their sexual identities and voice their opinions. The Woman-Identified Woman course was a big part of this process as it opened the doors of communication about sexuality in connection with women’s liberation.

Ann Neel was hired by Sonoma College as the first full-time Women’s Studies professor in 1972. Neel attended college during the civil rights, antiwar, and free speech movements and experienced the social unrest of the late 1960s first hand. She was living and teaching at the Santa Rosa Junior College during the initial stages of the Women’s Rights Movement and decided that she needed to bring the issues into the classroom.⁴¹ When she was offered a job at Sonoma State she saw an opportunity to discuss sexual identity in the classroom as well. Neel herself was a lesbian involved in the gay liberation movement. In 1970, she attended gay liberation meetings in San Francisco with her partner at the time, and in 1972 Neel organized a protest of a Junior College theater production of *The Killing of Sister George*, a play that depicted lesbians in stereotypical

⁴⁰ Susan Teller, interview with Shannon Mally, 6 May 2007. Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

⁴¹ The Santa Rosa Junior College was also in the process of developing courses about women. Ann Neel taught the first Junior College class on women titled, “Women in Society.” She was offered a teaching position in the Women’s Studies department at Sonoma State College just a year after she developed the course. In Sonoma County both of these academic institutions had a great impact on the feminist community.

butch roles.⁴² By publicly protesting the play, Neel disclosed her sexual identity in order to fight against oppression. This bold move was a defining moment in Neel's life and inspired her to explore other the ways that she could demystify homosexuality.⁴³

As a supporter of both women's rights and gay liberation, Ann Neel followed the emerging thought and literature, and she started to understand her own sexuality as more than just a personal choice, but also a political one. Neel remembered always being attracted to women, but she was ashamed of her sexuality and thought that she would grow out of it. In 1965 she came to terms with her sexuality, yet continued to closet herself in most situations. While attending consciousness-raising groups, she met women who told her, "'Don't you understand that it's a political choice, it's not a emotional.'" At first she did not understand how her sexuality could be political, but as she read books like *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae Brown and *Lesbian/Woman* by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, she started to see how lesbianism was connected to women's liberation.⁴⁴ Neel recalls, "[I] eventually began to understand, yes [sexuality] is quite political. Because it's all about power. And it's about identity." Neel continued to follow the emerging literature and believed that lesbianism was important to the liberation of women. "It's not that the action was necessarily to promote the situation of lesbians," she explained, "But it really had a very fundamental relationship to the idea of a woman being an independent

⁴² The protest for "The Killing of Sister George" is a fascinating moment in Sonoma County History and could be explored as an important identity moment. For more on the protest see the authors interview with Ann Neel, 21, March 2008, Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA. Also see, Gay Community Coalition, "Symposium on Homosexuality" flyer, Santa Rosa Junior College, 12-13 April 1972, Ann Neel's Private Collection, Guerneville, CA.

⁴³ Neel, 21 March 2008.

⁴⁴ Rita Mae Brown, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (New York: Bantom Books, 1973), Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman* (San Francisco: Glide Publications, 1972).

self defined person. A person who had as much right to walk down the street or look somebody in the eye as anybody else. It's so connected, it's hard to separate it." After she was hired in 1972, she developed a class about lesbianism for the Women's Studies department to introduce these insights to her students. Neel recalled, "The ideas and the feelings led me to think that...there needed to be a class on it." She took the name for the class from the manifesto written by the Lavender Menace and introduced the idea of lesbianism as political decision to the Sonoma State students.⁴⁵

The first Woman Identified Woman course was designed to cultivate conversation about the connections between lesbianism and feminism. It was so successful that it became one of the core Women's Studies courses and set the tone for the community of women that emerged. The first course description read, "The goal is to help liberated women and lesbians survive in a world that is hostile to them. An informal, discussion oriented class. We will use writing, role playing, psychodrama, and just plain conversation to work out problems besetting the gay and straight women's community, to understand how we presently act and how we can improve."⁴⁶ This description reveals that the course connected the lives of local women to the debates between gay and straight feminists across the country and provided an arena for students to explore their own conceptions of gender and sexuality. For lesbians, the concept of a Woman-Identified Woman legitimized their sexual desires. At the same time the concept challenged straight women to re-evaluate their own sexual identities. When I asked Pam Adinoff about the makeup of the class, she remembered, "I think there was a little of

⁴⁵ Neel, 21 March 2008.

⁴⁶ Women's Studies Course Offerings Pamphlet. Sonoma State College, Fall 1973. University Archives, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

everybody trying to figure out and ask questions and explore. The women who were out were adamantly out and those of us who were thinking and wondering and pondering – were – shy about it.”⁴⁷ The first course not only addressed the tensions between gay and straight women, it allowed for this conversation and exploration that Adinoff recalled.

As the department grew Ann Neel and subsequent professors shifted the Woman-Identified Woman course to reflect the students growing acceptance and adoption of the lesbian lifestyle as much more than just a personal preference. Just a year and a half later the course description read,

Moving outside the conventional expectations of what a ‘woman’ should be means confronting hostility, enormous ideological and social controls, especially when this rebellion includes loving other women. Gay and straight women alike share the critical problem of how to free themselves for the ideas that selfhood and strength come from relationships with men and/or identification with maleness. How do we deal with these issues in ourselves our working together to create new forms of living?⁴⁸

This description reveals that, in the course of a year and a half, the focus of the Woman-Identified Woman class shifted to an increasingly politicized view of “loving other women” that encompassed both gay and straight women. Instead of exploring the divides between gay and straight women, the Woman Identified Woman course suggested the idea that all women are oppressed by conventional gender and relationship roles.

The course description alluded to lesbians without using the term, which reflects the trend at the time to define lesbianism in contrast to the stereotypes of the past. Adinoff explained, “Back in the Seventies people didn’t even talk about and use the words ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual.’ They were all terms that were not disclosed at

⁴⁷ Adinoff, 17 April 2008.

⁴⁸ Women’s Studies Course listing pamphlet, Sonoma State College, Spring 1975. University Archives, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

all.”⁴⁹ Since the general public tended to associate the term homosexual with deviant outcasts, lesbians attempted to portray homosexuality in a different light. This was not to “pass” in mainstream society, but rather to connect the cause of feminism with sexuality by arguing that the two were inseparable in order to challenge women to re-define their personal and political identities.⁵⁰ Morgan Stewart, a student at the time, recalled, “I was just so overwhelmed at how many ways there were to be female and how many ways there were to be a lesbian...It was not just this stereotype that I grew up with that, you know, you weighed three hundred and fifty pounds and wore leather dog collars and carry a whip, which is really the image I had in mind”⁵¹ The Woman-Identified Woman course drew on the emerging feminist theories to present lesbians as liberated and politically conscious, which created a culture of exploration and acceptance in the Women’s Studies department. The student’s experiences in the courses as well as the relationships they built along the way greatly impacted the way they personally defined and articulated their identities.

Sonoma State students started to understand their own lives differently as they explored gender and sexuality, and many made the decision to come out as lesbians. For some, this decision was an acknowledgement of their long time desires, and for others the decision to be a lesbian was purely political at first. Either way, women made a commitment to themselves and their community by rejecting traditional roles and placing women at the center of their lives. Ruth Mahaney succeeded Ann Neel in 1974 and, as a

⁴⁹ Adinoff, 17 April 2008.

⁵⁰ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 208.

⁵¹ Morgan Stewart, interview by Alycia Cronin, 7 May 2007. Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

lesbian herself, continued to cultivate an accepting environment in the Women's Studies department. She explained,

It was very important that there be a space that it was really ok to be a lesbian. People came out a lot in Women's Studies. They would come to Women's Studies and then start thinking about these issues and decide that was what they wanted in their lives, and they would come out and they would come and announce it to me often. I was sort of part of everybody's—not everybody's but part of a lot of people's coming out stories. They would walk into my office and sit down and say, 'I'm a lesbian.'⁵²

For these women, the coming out process was indicative of a break with the past and a new way of living their lives. The Women's Studies department entered into many of the coming out stories of the women interviewed. Tina Dungan explained, "It was in that whole process of becoming part of Women's Studies and creating Women's Studies that I came out as a lesbian. I was in a very sheltered environment on campus."⁵³ This sheltered environment that developed as the Women's Studies department grew fostered a tight-knit community of women who shared experiences and explored new ways of living. Molly Murphy MacGregor enrolled at Sonoma State as a graduate student. She had worked as a history teacher and realized that women were hardly ever mentioned in textbooks. This interest drew her to the Women's Studies department where she found like-minded women and a supportive community. Describing her college experience, MacGregor said, "In this process of Women's Studies and getting involved with other women and all this stuff I had come out as a lesbian."⁵⁴ Dungan and MacGregor's

⁵² Ruth Mahaney, Interview by the author, 11 March 2008, Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

⁵³ Tina Dungan, interview by the author, 18 March 2008, Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

⁵⁴ Molly Murphy MacGregor, interview by the author, 10 May 2007. Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

coming out stories reflect the way that identity can shift in response to the involvement in a particular community.

In the process of coming out, women connected to one another on an emotional and political level, and a strong female-centered community developed on campus. Although not all women in the department identified as lesbians, the focus on women empowered lesbians. Ruth Mahaney remembered that the department provided a safe space for discussion and exploration: “To have Women’s Studies be so identified as lesbian in that regard always felt like such a small microcosm where lesbians were in power or were able to be out, in this teeny place.”⁵⁵ Students who revealed or adopted lesbian identities were able to articulate their personal experiences without fear of public ridicule.

Although the decision to come out was sometimes political, the decision became intensely personal as women explored what living a lesbian lifestyle meant. In an anonymous paper from one of the Woman-Identified Woman courses, a student wrote,

I found myself loving another woman. And I was scared, so scared that I might not have said anything if she had not let me know that she loved me. What I was afraid of was not social ostracism or the power of the name lesbian, because I already thought that homosexuality was necessary to our liberation. I was simply afraid to find out that this too was a fraud and to be left with nothing. But somehow my love was greater than my fear. I was so clumsy and ignorant of how to make love to another woman; but the first time we slept together I did not mind being those things. I had never felt so completely joyous. I was one individual whole person and she was a different individual whole person and we were loving without trying to obliterate that integrity through passion or control. I was no longer an outside observer watching my body go through the motions. My mind was with my body was with my heart. I’ve learned so much.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Mahaney, 11 March 2008.

⁵⁶ “To My Sisters”, Woman-Identified Woman anonymous class assignment, 1975, Ann Neel’s Private Collection, Guerneville, CA.

This intimate description reveals the deeply personal nature of the decision to love other women. The fear of fraud that the student describes is indicative of her shifting reality and identity. The student, who had already made a political statement by coming out as a lesbian, feared that she might not actually be able to fully embrace the identity if her sexual experience with a woman failed. The positive experience confirmed her identity and filled her with an intense joy as she fully accepted a new way of loving.

Some women made a political decision prior to loving another women; however, for some women the opposite was true. For instance, J.J. Wilson recalled that one woman told her, “You know, with me the first person I fell in love with happened to be a woman and now I’ve got all these labels pinned on me and I’m supposed to live a certain kind of life and I often feel it’s not me.”⁵⁷ Since politics as well as personal emotions informed sexual identity, the term lesbian (or woman identified woman) was defined in many different ways. Nevertheless, the compact community of college women experienced dilemmas as expectations of what a lesbian should be and do emerged as part of the social structure. Wilson explains that the woman she talked to “was feeling the power of the stereotype.”⁵⁸ The power that Wilson points out both created a sense of community for women who had never before fit the traditional mold while ostracizing other women who did not adhere to the new expectations.

The Women’s Studies community was dedicated to cultivating independence and empowering women; however, at times the communal identity that emerged caused both internal and external conflict. As women studied together they built a close community

⁵⁷ J.J. Wilson, interviewed by the author, 21 July 2008. Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

and worked collectively to understand and define their identities. In this process, expectations of how a conscious feminist woman should act, speak, think, and even dress emerged. Students promoted the idea that feminists should negate the oppressive power of patriarchy by rejecting traditional stereotypes and privileging women in all areas of their lives. Ironically, by rejecting one stereotype new ones evolved. When asked about this time period, Phyllis Onstad recalled,

You almost felt guilty if you were straight. I mean, because there were many many many more lesbians than there were straight women, At least in those days. Now we're talking about the early 70's. It was not politically correct to sleep with men, you know, I mean that's just the bottom line. You could slide by if you slept with both, but you had to defend your position, if you chose to be a heterosexual.⁵⁹

The Women's Studies program tried to welcome all women. Nevertheless, straight women often felt uncomfortable if they didn't comply with the expectations. Molly MacGregor first joined the Women's Studies department as a straight woman and, like many others, came out as a lesbian in the process. Like Onstad, MacGregor also remembered a code of conduct that emerged as from the budding feminist community,

When I first went to Sonoma State I came out in the Women's Studies program so for the first year or so I was there I was straight and I was with a man...and Susie and I were very, very close. We took a lot of shit later when I came out because people had made an assumption that we were girlfriends and we didn't know that they were making those assumptions. This is at a time when lesbians got so defensive about heterosexual privilege...Susie and I hung around each other, we kissed each other, arm-in-arm, we're best friends, big deal. Then when they found out that that wasn't true...I was never the appropriate lesbian. I was never the appropriate straight woman; I was never the appropriate lesbian because there were all these unspoken things about who you were as a lesbian.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Phyllis Onstad, interview by Kate Tasker, 15 November 2006, Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

⁶⁰ Molly Murphy MacGregor, interview by the author, 17 October 2008, Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

MacGregor's experience illuminates the dilemma of definition that the feminist community faced in this period. On one side, lesbians who had never felt accepted before believed that these unspoken expectations were necessary to maintain an accepting atmosphere. On the other side, some women did not comply with these expectations and felt that they were ostracized because of the way they personally chose to articulate the feminist or lesbian identity.

The internal expectations of the campus feminist community also created external stereotypes, which kept some women away from the Women's Studies department all together. The department faculty was aware of the drawbacks of this emerging communal identity, and they tried to create an inviting atmosphere for all women, regardless of age, race, sexual preference, or class. As a professor, Ruth Mahaney understood that the expectations could be divisive and tried to encourage communication amongst gay and straight students. However, Mahaney told me, "I remember for a couple of people thinking, 'Oh, darn, I thought—' Because the accusation to us was always that we were making women into lesbians all the time...So every time we had somebody who seemed like a wonderful heterosexual woman and she would come out, I was like, "Darn, I thought that we were going to disprove the [stereotype]." ⁶¹

Nevertheless, faculty still tried to promote diversity on a number of levels and offered classes on many different topics, including health, history, and art, as well as classes on different cultures such as, Latinas, African Americans, and Native Americans. Although these courses educated the Women's Studies students, the

⁶¹ Mahaney, 11 March 2008.

department had a hard time drawing students from other departments. One semester Ruth Mahaney co-taught a class with one of the professors from the Black Studies department as an effort to bridge the divide between the departments, but the class did not turn out the way she expected. She explained,

The original idea was to co-teach [the class] because I felt like there was no substitute for who's the teacher, you can't be a white woman and be a role model for women of color in the room. As we were planning the class together I asked [my colleague] one-day, what was happening in terms of black students, were they going to take the class? She said, 'Well, the other day a couple of them came up and said they weren't going to take the class because it was just a bunch of Lesbians in Women's Studies,' so they weren't going to go near that. Ada said, 'So I told them 'How do you know that and what do you know?' I told them they were crazy.' Then I realized that she didn't know that I was a lesbian, so I took a deep breath and said, 'Well, Ada, I am a lesbian.' She said later that she wanted to like take her hand and push the words back into my mouth; she so didn't want those words to come out of my mouth. I said, 'But I really want so much for this program to deal with racial differences and to understand these issues. If you think it hurts the class I certainly would not say that in class. I will remain closeted in order to teach this class because I think that's the point here and I want that to be the point of this class.' She just shook her head and said, 'No, you can't lie to your students. You never lie to your students. I don't want you to do that.' It meant that what did happen was that the class was all white women the first couple of times we taught it. It was very difficult for my co-teacher—for all the white women in the room, many of them, she was their first real exposure with a black woman. To be someone's first black woman in their lives is a very difficult position and it was very hard for her. There was so much they didn't understand, there was so much they had never heard before.⁶²

Mahaney's class pinpoints the problem of exclusion that can occur within marginalized communities. Although the lesbian focus of the women's studies department allowed a group of women to feel safe and empowered, it did ostracize others, and as a result women did not join the department or even consider taking the classes. Despite the downfalls, the women's studies department provided a space to build a woman-identified community that was central to the momentum of the movement to redefine womanhood.

⁶²Ibid.

The sense of communal identity that emerged from the Woman-Identified Woman course and the Women's Studies department informed the way women understood themselves and the world around them. For many women, this community was a haven where they could comfortably express themselves and test out the waters of a new way of living. Looking back, Ruth Mahaney contemplated, "I think what was happening generally was that people were trying on that identity."⁶³

Having the space to 'try on' a lesbian identity gave women the chance to investigate how they could oppose traditional gender roles and also how they could work together to benefit women in their community, both on and off campus. Inspired by their professors, classmates, and courses to take what they learned and put it into action, some women remained on campus and developed a women's center to educate other female students while other students left campus to work on behalf of women in the greater Sonoma County area. Community women, who were inspired both by the national movement as well as local events, were also starting to come out of the woodwork and work towards change on a local level. The two communities of women came into contact and developed a conversation about what it meant to be a feminist or a lesbian in different spaces. As women collided with one another they combined forces for the greater good of the their community. In the process women built a force for action as well as a social culture that educated and inspired more women to examine what it meant to be a woman, what it meant to be a lesbian, and how they could change their world.

⁶³Ibid.

Chapter 2: Building a Women-Centered Niche in Sonoma County

In 1970, Robin Gail and her husband moved to Sonoma County, had a baby, and shortly after separated. Looking for support, she sought out the Women's Studies department and the emerging Women's Center on the Sonoma State campus but did not find the community she needed. Gail recalled, "I knew there was a women's center and a women's studies group at Sonoma State, so I tried to get a way in there, but it didn't seem like anybody wanted to relate to a straight lady and her kid, you know? Plus I was a little bit older than a lot of them. I was probably 35 and most of them were 22 or something at the time. So I didn't do that, and went on and tried different things."⁶⁴ She decided to search out other avenues for support in the community. In this process she started writing for the local *Cotati News Herald* where she found other like-minded women who were also seeking support. These women were impacted by the feminist consciousness sweeping the nation at the time as well as their own personal experiences. Many women in Sonoma County and across the nation read books like *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan or *Our Bodies, Our Selves* by the Boston Women's Health Collective, which encouraged them to re-examine what it meant to be a woman.⁶⁵ This is best exemplified by Carolyn Metz, who recalled, "I just by chance I came upon the book, *Our Bodies Our Selves* and I sat down in my van, and I started reading and I could not take my attention

⁶⁴ Robin Gail, interview by Joy Young, 18 April 2008. Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

⁶⁵ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963) Friedan's influential book explored the dissatisfaction middle-class women felt with their lives. Boston Women's Health Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973) This book was initially written as an attempt to educate women about their own bodies instead of depending on "expert" advice from male doctors. It was written by, about, and for women. Currently the collective has published twelve editions of the influential book.

away from that book. I just thought, ‘this is amazing...everything that these women are talking about.’ And, really it was from that point onward that my consciousness about, women’s issues, and the women’s community, and you know women’s rights...the whole array of self-esteem issues, and all of that stuff just really started to kind of unfold and I opened my eyes to a world that I had not been aware of before. It was an amazing, amazing experience.”⁶⁶ As women like Gail and Metz grappled with these new ideas, they sought out a women-centered community in Sonoma County.

At this point, the women’s movement on the national level was once again in the wake of some major changes. As women across the country adopted feminist identities, the focus of activism expanded to incorporate more interests and circumstances. New collectives tended to focus on specific issues such as women’s health, domestic violence, or education whereas previous feminist organizations had attempted to address women’s equality as a whole. These new branches of activism recruited a broad range of women who joined together to form strong women’s communities. Between 1970 and 1975, the attitude towards lesbians involved in the women’s movement also changed drastically. Groups like the Radical Lesbians and later The Furies in New York popularized the concept that lesbianism and feminism went hand in hand.⁶⁷ In cities and towns across the United States, women came out as lesbians as both a political and personal statement. In

⁶⁶ Carolyn Metz, interview by Julianne Bettega, 16 May 2006, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

⁶⁷ The Radical Lesbians grew out of a collective of women who presented the “Woman-Identified Woman” manifesto at the Congress to Unite Women in 1970. Led by Rita Mae Brown, the group promoted the idea that lesbians were the embodiment of feminist theory. In 1971 the collective became “The Furies.” The women in the collective lived communally for over two years and published and distributed a lesbian feminist newspaper. See Rita Mae Brown, *Rita Will: Memoir of a Literary Rabble-Rouser* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997).

this process, a women-centered culture emerged that fostered woman-only space. Women worked together to create a community where they relied on one another for support and opposed traditional feminine stereotypes. To do so, women formed support networks, learned traditionally male trades and provided service for other women, worked together to live off the land, and studied women's history. Although many lesbians fueled these communities, their main focus was not on lesbianism but rather on creating an arena where women could convene and develop feminist ideologies.⁶⁸

The emerging feminist communities developed a women's culture that was unprecedented at the time, literally offering women a new way of living. They emphasized the need for women-only space through the creation of women's centers, feminist bookstores and cafes, women's music and production labels, as well as newspapers and journals.⁶⁹ Across the country, this culture allowed women to explore how they could live their lives independently of men by relying on other women and themselves. An important part of this culture was a communal understanding of feminist identity. This was communicated through women's music, women's social activities, and perhaps most importantly, women's newspapers. There were nationally distributed papers and journals as well as smaller presses that served local communities. National magazines and journals added to the concept of a connected national movement and encouraged women to work for change in their own communities.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Davis, *Moving the Mountain*, 138.

⁶⁹ In Sonoma County some of these cultural organizations were the Moonrise Café, Rising Woman Books, the Penngrove Women's center, the River Queen women's center, and Olivia records.

⁷⁰ Perhaps the most popular feminist publication was Ms. Magazine, first published in 1972. For more on the magazine see, Carol Polsgrove "Yours in Sisterhood: 'Ms.' Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism," *Journal of American History* 86

Influenced by larger publications, women developed newspapers and journals in their own local areas. For example, Baltimore feminists distributed their own publication entitled, *Women: A Journal of Liberation*, and in Ohio feminists developed the *Womansong* newspaper.⁷¹ Women's press had a huge impact on feminist culture as well as women's activism. It provided a place for women to work together to develop their own communal identity and served as a forum for conversation. An article on "Women in Print" in the October 1976 issue of Sonoma County's first women's newspaper, *Runes*, demonstrates the national importance of women's newspapers and publications. In this report the author quoted feminist theorist June Arnold, who said, "We have created a circle of media control with every link covered; a woman writes a book or article, a woman typesets it, a woman illustrates it and lays it out, a woman prints it, a woman's journal reviews it, and women read it—from Canada to Mexico and coast to coast."⁷² This 'circle of media control' reflects the interconnected feminist community and culture that grew between 1972 and 1978.

Although many of the women in this movement identified as lesbians, we see that the emphasis is on women as a whole. The goal of feminist culture was to create safe space for all women and establish a circle of sisterhood. However, not all women felt comfortable in these new communities. Soon the women's movement encountered changes once again as women who felt marginalized by cultural feminism asked what it

(1999): 332-333. In addition, radical feminists and lesbian feminist created their own papers and journals.

⁷¹ For more about *Women: A Journal of Liberation* see Laurel A. Clark. "Beyond the Gay/ Straight Split." For more about *Womansong* see, Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp. "Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism."

⁷² Jesse Meredith, "Women in Print," *Runes*, October 1967, 1. All the issues of *Runes* mentioned in this chapter are housed in the Sitting Room Archives in Cotati, CA.

really meant to be a woman and how the answer differed depending on race, class, and ethnicity.

The 1970s feminist culture promoted the idea that all women were essentially alike in the way that they all encountered oppression due to their gender. This idea led to a feeling of sisterhood and community among participants but alienated women who felt that their situation was different due to their class, race, or ethnicity. White women made up the majority of the feminist communities, and although some women of color participated, many felt that their ethnic identity did not or could not mesh with feminist identity. Many minority women could not relate to the cultural feminist idea that a woman must reject or separate from men since they were close with their families and saw the men in their communities as allies in the fight against oppression. Although women from many different backgrounds encountered this dilemma, Black women and Latinas developed two new branches of feminism between 1971 and 1980. Participants in these movements were sympathetic to the issues that white women organized around but felt that they needed to organize on their own in order to address the dual oppression they lived with every day as both minorities and women.⁷³

As Black women and Latinas organized, they publicly called attention to the lack of emphasis on race and ethnicity in the mainstream feminist movement. They argued that race, class, and gender were interlocking systems of oppression; one could not be torn down without addressing the others. Although many identified with some of the white feminists' arguments, most did not join the feminist movement because they felt to do so they would have to betray their ethnic identities. Historian Benita Roth explains,

⁷³ Davis, *Moving the Mountain*, 364.

“Black feminists argued that the white feminist agenda did not link gender oppression with other kinds of oppressions...[They] saw white feminists as overtly concerned with cultural change at the expense of economic change...Many Black feminists criticized white feminist conceptions of the need to alter the nuclear family as insufficiently cognizant of how men in the Black community saw the Black family as threatened.”⁷⁴

Many Black feminists felt that the only way to link gender and race was to develop their own coalitions and their own movement, in much the same way that lesbian women had done previously.

Like Black feminists, Latinas also argued that the mainstream women’s movement glossed over issues of race and class. Many Latinas were introduced to political ideas through their involvement in the Chicano movement. This movement was an attempt to politicize and mobilize the Chicano and Latino community to fight for social and economic equality. One of the tactics of the movement was to promote cultural preservation in opposition to assimilation with the dominant society. As a result, Latinos stressed traditional family values and promoted machismo or a macho male attitude.⁷⁵

Women were encouraged to support the men in re-claiming their masculinity and those who chose to embrace feminism were belittled and accused of betraying their brothers to side with white women. Leticia Hernandez, who tried to bring feminist ideals into the Chicano movement, recalled, “We were ridiculed...’All that slop and ridiculous feminist

⁷⁴ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

bullshit and ha ha ha...oh here come the feminists, they're trying to be white women.”⁷⁶

As a result Latinas joined together to create their own coalitions similar to the Black feminist coalitions. Both emerging forms of feminism sought to create their own ideology that encompassed race, class, and gender. They drew upon their personal and communal histories to develop theories that combined mainstream feminist ideals with their own culture and beliefs. The arguments presented by these women challenged the idea of sisterhood that cultural feminism promoted. As women of color voiced their concerns, white feminists across the country re-examined their own coalitions and communities and feminism began to shift.⁷⁷ Although cultural feminism initially promoted an inaccurate feminist ideal of sisterhood and commonality, women-centered communities were significant to the fight for women's rights and women's liberation throughout the country.

By 1976, when the first issue of the Sonoma County women's newspaper *Runes* was published, the women's movement in the county was thriving. Women at Sonoma State College began to take what they had learned and the identities they had adopted off campus and into the community. Similarly, community women also started to organize for change. Although Sonoma State students and community women were all in the process of seeking out feminist community they did not initially combine forces. Gale's impression that Sonoma State women did not want to relate with “a straight lady and her kid”⁷⁸ reflected the tension between campus and community women. Despite these

⁷⁶ Leticia Hernandez, interviewed by Maylei Blackwell, 28 July 1992, as quoted in Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 140.

⁷⁷ Rosemarie Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 220-222.

⁷⁸ Gail, 18 April 2008.

differences, these women inevitably crossed paths as they sought to impact their communities. The Women's Studies department encouraged action beyond the classroom; therefore many students organized on their own time to socialize and, in the process, evaluate their communities and form coalitions. As campus women organized they came in contact with community women who had common goals and eventually many joined forces. Like other women across the nation, they formed coalitions that focused on specific issues like health, rape, domestic violence, and education. The Women's Studies department at Sonoma State also started to encourage more re-entry students to join the program. While college women entered into the community, community women enrolled in the college. This combination of forces led to an expanded women's community and a growing number of women's resources in Sonoma County. Community women and college women, straight and gay women, all joined together to enact change in their local communities.

Although there were tensions regarding ideology, tactics, and identity, most Sonoma County women chose to join together because they saw the task at hand as more important than their personal ideals. In the process of working, together women discussed their differing realities, which led to a more encompassing movement. For example, Tina Dungan was one of the founders of the Penngrove Women's Center, started primarily by Sonoma State students who identified as lesbians. She recalled,

We started the Penngrove Women's Center and started to know other lesbians that were out in the community that weren't on campus. I remember two women – Nancy and Debra Kelly – who were, I think, going to the junior college in Santa Rosa and they were very interested in becoming part of the Penngrove Women's Center. They would come down and help clean up and do whatever we did and we would have these discussions about community versus campus dykes. I don't remember a whole lot of the content but I remember enough to know that there was some tension there and it was sort of a class thing. They were also not just

speaking for themselves so much as they were speaking for other lesbians out in the community who weren't school dykes. So that was an eye-opener for me. I wasn't uncomfortable with it, I felt somewhat like I did when I was dealing with the racial stuff when I was at [University of the Pacific], like really open to being there and making something work that made everybody happy, whatever that was. I was pretty idealistic.⁷⁹

Conversations like these made it possible for campus and community women to not only work together but also to teach one another and mesh their ideologies and communities together.

As part of this process women joined many different coalitions and worked together on various projects. One day a woman might go to the Penngrove women's center for a women-only dance, and the next day she might go to a rally to protect abortion rights. There were so many opportunities for women to become involved and many did so in a variety of organizations addressing different issues. Phyllis Onstad explained that, "On the whole- the borders were very fluid, we were sharing space, sharing members."⁸⁰ Collectives intertwined, exchanged ideas, combined, and worked together for the cause of the movement. It is during this very rich time in Sonoma County that women joined together to form *Runes*. The women's movement was on the way up, people were excited and eager, and women were shifting and adapting their identities as they expanded their understanding of what it meant to be a woman.

The creation of the first Sonoma County women-centered newspaper brought campus women and community women together to build a strong feminist coalition. The paper itself was vastly important in creating a local conversation about what it meant to be a woman, a feminist, and even a lesbian. The paper can be seen as a nexus of identity

⁷⁹ Tina Dungan, interview by the author, 18 March 2008, Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

⁸⁰ Onstad, 15 November 2006.

formation, articulation and negotiation. An analysis of the oral history interviews and the paper itself reveals three distinct ways that *Runes* impacted identity. First, the creation of *Runes* served as an identity moment for the founders and those who joined the collective. Second, the paper itself functioned as a communal literary space for women to discuss and express opinions and identity. In addition, it was an outreach tool that connected women with opportunities for action. Finally, the distribution of the paper added to the growth of participants in the women's movement as women moved to Sonoma County to join the feminist community. Examining each of these facets of the paper reveals the impact of the paper on the Sonoma County women's movement. In addition, it demonstrates the integrative nature that is emblematic of coalitions and organizations throughout the county.

Runes began when Robin Gayle and other women from the *Cotati News Herald* decided to create their own paper. At the same time a group of Sonoma State students set out with the same goal in mind. Since both parties wanted to start a paper, they decided to meet and talk about the possibility of working together. Robin Gayle remembered, "We were having meetings about starting this newspaper, and by this time we'd collected maybe four, five, six other women who were all straight. And we'd heard over at Sonoma [State] there was another group of women who wanted to start a newspaper. So we contacted them and we got together because we thought, 'why do two when we can get together and do one?'"⁸¹ At this point all the community women identified as straight while most of the Sonoma State students identified as lesbians. When these two groups joined together, they had to grapple with their differences and decide whether or not they

⁸¹ Gail, 18 April 2008.

were actually working towards the same goals. In the process, they exchanged ideas and expanded their understanding of what gender and sexuality meant in their own lives and for their communities.

Campus and community women initially began by discussing their goals for the paper to see if it would be possible to combine forces. Karen Rose worked with Robin Gayle at the *News Herald*, and she recalled that the Sonoma State students and her group of community women “spent six months meeting once a week just talking about whether or not we [could] work together and trust each other and have a newspaper that would represent both sides and be supportive of...just processing and processing, the 1970’s were all about processing.”⁸² Rose refers to ‘both sides’, meaning the group of straight community women and the gay campus women. This moment reflects the focus of national historical narratives on the divisions between straight and gay feminists; however, the fact that women in Sonoma County bridged the initial divides in order to work together diverges from the narrative to portray a united past. We see that during this period the women worked together to exchange ideas and tactics for impacting the community and reaching out to more women. The two groups of women eventually made a conscious decision to put aside their differences and work together for the good of their community. Rose went on to say, “We finally decided that, yeah, we both wanted the same thing and were going to be able to trust each other and work together.” During these initial meetings, the women also discussed the meaning of gender and the way it connected to sexuality. Campus women introduced the concept of a woman-identified

⁸² Karen Rose, interviewed by Monique Reioux, 21 May 2007, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

woman to the straight community women who had previously understood lesbianism in a very different light.

The budding collective of women not only worked together but also merged as they developed similar ideologies. In fact, many of the community women eventually adopted a lesbian identity. Like Gayle, the other women from the *News Herald* were in the process of redefining their lives. By choosing to become woman-identified women they could make a break with the past and pour their energy into empowering all women. Rose explained, “By the time that the first issue came out I think everybody came out...the only one who didn’t come out was the straight women [from] Sonoma.”⁸³ By combining forces, both community women and college women expanded their understanding of themselves and the women around them. This process resulted in the development of a paper that encouraged women across the county to re-imagine their own lives and take action in a multitude of ways in order to impact their own communities.

Although the majority of the *Runes* collective identified as lesbians, they sought to create a paper focused on all women, including gay and straight women. As such, the paper served as a communal literary space for the expanding feminist community. In this light it had three functions. First, it allowed for creative public expression of identity. Second, it served as a forum and provided a space for discussion. Finally, it served as an outreach tool by connecting women to resources and opportunities. These components of the paper contributed to the feeling of feminist community in the county and led to the growth of feminist activism.

⁸³Ibid.

One of the most important functions of the paper was that it invited women to creatively express themselves and their opinions. In the very first issue of *Runes* published in April 1973, the front-page read,

The *Runes* staff presents the first issue of our magazine with relatively few contributions from women outside the collective. We hope this condition will change immediately after this magazine gets into circulation. We want to have a comfortable dialogue with the community and with our perspective contributors. In addition to printing your news items, artwork, poetry and prose, we solicit feedback from the community in the form of Letters-to-the-Editor, and you are invited to attend our open collective meetings, which are held on the second Tuesday evenings of every month at 7:30⁸⁴

By inviting collaboration, the staff fostered a paper that reflected both the national and local issues and nurtured personal creativity. Today the paper provides historical insight into the varying ways that women grappled with their identities.

After gathering submissions each month, the *Runes* collective worked together to lay out the paper. Throughout the pages, clean line pencil drawings, charcoal portraits, and gritty black and white photographs accompanied the news, reviews, fiction, and poetry. Each aspect of the writing and production of the paper was done by Sonoma County women. Phyllis Onstad, a member of the collective and a contributor, remembered,

You got to be as creative as you wanted to be, we did a lot of our own writing, there was a lot of resistance to editing... a lot of it was very personal writing. *Very* personal writing. I did an article at one point called "The Circle of Loneliness," which was... a very hard piece for me to publish. 'Cause it was *very* personal. And the way we set it up was, another woman in the collective drew the perfect picture for it, and we actually typed around the picture, so there was actually a circle, and I was really kind of proud of that. It was a vehicle where we could express views, where we had more freedom- I mean, working on a newspaper, you were kind of constrained by whatever, you know, the owners of the newspaper wanted to do. And this

⁸⁴ "Runestaff," *Runes*, April 1976, 3.

one you could, you know, you could make it up as you went along!...there was a lot of poetry in it, there was fiction in it... t wasn't as polemical as some of the publications from that era, you know...there was no ideological purity kind of thing...you could be a lot more free with it.⁸⁵

Onstad's memory illustrates the way the paper empowered women to creatively express themselves. By contributing to the paper, women expressed their personal stories to connect with the feminist community, but also as a therapeutic way to grapple with their past and present. For instance, in the May 1977 issue, a contributor wrote a poem to her estranged son. It read,

There are things I must tell you Jon, for you are my younger son, whom I cannot see, yet see everywhere...

I must tell you how women
give birth alone,
at kitchen tables.
They cry, grab the child
as it glides out and clip the bloody cord
with their own sharp teeth.
How fathers just stand by, patiently,
waiting for their time...

Now you are 13 now and I do not know
you. I am only a phantom mother,
dreaming of a phantom son. Oh, summer-
brown child of half-breed Indians
and English Ladies, how you must have
grown! Only a strong tree survives
such a violent transplanting...⁸⁶

The personal nature of this poem reflects the writing found throughout the various *Runes* editions. In a way, the paper served a similar purpose as consciousness-raising groups. It provided space for women to discuss their personal lives in order

⁸⁵ Onstad, 15 November 2006.

⁸⁶ Nell Truelove, "To My Son Jon, in New Mexico, On his 13th Birthday," *Runes*, May 1977, 12.

to understand the political meaning of gender and sexuality. In turn, the public articulation of their personal identity negotiation spoke to other women and strengthened the feeling of a communal struggle and a communal identity. Phyllis Onstad explained, “For women who contributed to the paper the individual impact was big as well. Not only were they voicing their opinions but they were being published and distributed to an entire community.”⁸⁷ Therefore, the paper also empowered women to value and express their viewpoints.

In order to create a dynamic and innovative paper the collective invited women to submit pieces that expressed their opinions and personal realities. Each month the staff picked a theme for the publication and invited contributions from the community. By focusing on a variety of topics, they were able to address both local and national issues. The theme also gave contributors direction and encouraged women to voice their personal experiences. By contributing to the paper, women had a chance to publicly disclose their identities and speak to other women across the community. The paper contained a ‘...Forum’ section, which highlighted the submissions that related to the theme of the month. For example, in the October 1976 ‘Politics’ edition, Ann E. Kain wrote,

Just as the personal is political, and liberation is political, so too is personal liberation political. For me, liberation comes with a growing political awareness of where we are in society, how we got there and how we can get out. I have noticed that as my awareness of my own oppression has grown, society has also developed an increased but distorted awareness of how people like me are taking power today. I want to be a loving, strong, nurturing, creative, sexual, beautiful woman, and I want for every person to be able to express themselves if they choose...For me feminism says: Let the men learn from the women. Let’s encourage an awareness of people as people.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Onstad, 15 November 2006.

⁸⁸ Ann E. Kain. “...Forum,” *Runes*, October 1976, 3.

This articulates the way that Kain's political awareness directly connected to her personal identity. *Runes* gave Kain a chance to define feminism and politics in her own terms in a public arena. She went on to assert, "I fight as hard as I can. I won't back down. I will show my rage and my love. I will be strong and I will cry. Daily I will make war against the sexist oppression I feel as a woman."⁸⁹ Her piece demonstrates how *Runes* gave women a chance to verbalize what feminism meant to them personally. In doing so they made public statements that validated their own commitment to feminism while simultaneously calling on other women to respond.

As a forum for discussion, the paper also presented differing viewpoints. This is particularly evident in the February 1977 edition on 'Loving.' This issue focused on personal conceptions of sexual identity and sought to present both lesbian and straight viewpoints. This issue reflects the collective's desire to create a publication for all women by exploring sexuality in an open and honest way. In an article titled, "Loving Lesbian, Loving Women," contributor Melanie Elmore wrote,

I am a lesbian and I am a woman-identified-woman, which means that I love women in total – emotionally, spiritually, and physically. My politics and philosophies are mine as an individual and as a lesbian. My class, race, and sexuality have all had a role in my individual history, but the rekindling of woman-power and woman-love within my spiritual self is creating my life's lessons and developing my growth and knowledge. My sisters, known or unknown, lovers or not, are all a part of me.⁹⁰

Like many other women, Elmore found a sense of strength and belonging in her lesbian identity and was able publicly articulate this through the paper. She expressed her sexuality not only as a preference but also as a political acknowledgement of her feminist

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Melanie Elmore, "Loving Lesbian, Loving Women," *Runes*, February 1977, 17.

philosophy. Her point of view undoubtedly resonated with many women in the county; however, straight women often felt ostracized by the feminist focus on lesbianism. In an effort to address this predicament, the 'Loving' issue included a personal narrative from straight women about her struggle with sexual identity. In the article, 'Wrestling with Angels', one woman wrote,

My friends were coming out. My ears heard from one of them, 'I'm a Lesbian now, you should be one too.' From another one I heard, 'You've been on the fence for too long, you coward.'...I was becoming aware of the 'women's community.' They all hate me, I thought. Just because I'm not a Lesbian. Well, maybe I am a Lesbian. I could be anyway...Finally I couldn't stand it anymore. I had to do the correct thing. I couldn't walk down the street with my male lover if my sisters couldn't walk down the street with their female lovers....That was the crisis point for me. Because while I was doing this I felt a rage inside me at my sisters for making me do this thing. Finally I heard me, myself. It was just a faint voice, but I heard me and I listened hard for the sound I had not heard in months. My own heart, my own feelings suddenly mattered to me more than any political theory I could read about. I went to my friends and told them what I had decided. It might mean that we had to separate, but I had to stay who I was. They accepted me, of course, because they are my friends.⁹¹

This woman's internal struggle was important for the collective to include because it not only allowed a women to express herself and articulate her personal decision, but it also addressed the struggle with sexuality that played out both on a national and local level. By presenting these two differing viewpoints in the same issue, the collective cultivated a conversation about the meaning of sexual identity. Both women express their personal opinions in an effort to encourage other women to re-evaluate their understanding and expression of self.

Although the woman-centered community was thriving in Sonoma County, there were women who did not see eye to eye with feminism. In addition, some participants of the movement had harsh criticisms of what they saw. The *Runes* collective did not shy

⁹¹ Dolores, "Wrestling with Angels," *Runes*, February 1977, 15.

away from these realities and encouraged everyone to enter submissions. As the paper grew, more and more people started reading the free paper, including community members who did not identify as part of the feminist movement. Sometimes they wrote in with their opinions and criticisms of the movement. For example, the June 1977 issue began with an anonymous letter to the feminist community from a 'Welfare Mother.' The author wrote,

You murder me, women's' liberationist, every bullshit demand you make; not because what you ask for is wrong, but because of what you leave out. Where is free childbirth in your platform, where is decent pre-natal care? Where is nourishing food for me, so my child isn't born premature or retarded? Where is a decent place to live, enough clothes, freedom from disease and filth?...When you make love, it's meaningful, its exploring alternative lifestyles, its individual freedom, breaking the shackles of Freudianism, and Judeo-Christian morality. It's finding yourself, discovering sexuality. When I screw, it's immoral, irresponsible, decadent, evil, promiscuous, casual, low, wrong. You sit up there and debate the meaning of sexuality and the merits of choosing celibacy. I'm supposed to live in forced celibacy.⁹²

This piece publicly communicated the author's pain and anger at the limited scope of the feminist agenda. This shows that even the women-centered movement in Sonoma County alienated women who did not feel like they fit the 'feminist' mold due to their class. Yet, the fact that this letter was published on the front page of *Runes* demonstrates the collective attempt to address the divisions and open the lines of communication beyond their comfortable community. By printing this letter the collective gave a public voice to this woman and called attention to an important issue for the feminist community.

Similarly, the collective also published submissions from members of the feminist community that called attention to the pressing concerns, issues, and downfalls. This sparked debate, encouraged more women to write in, and inspired women to evaluate

⁹² "Letter from a Welfare Mother," *Runes*, June 1977, 1.

their own political positions. In the August 1976 issue, Phyllis Bergman submitted a commentary for the “Forum” section as a response to a previous contributors piece on the divisions within the movement. She stated,

It is disturbing to me that after so many, many years of theorizing and debating the issues, Feminists are still unable to agree on our collective self concept...I cannot overlook the dilemma of factionalism and bickering and must take a step towards understanding ‘us’ and ‘we’ better. During my 5-year involvement in feminist circles in the Bay Area, two issues have emerged the most alarmingly threatening to Feminist progress and cooperation, namely negative attitudes toward both sexuality and spirituality.⁹³

By publishing this piece, the collective acknowledged the divides in the feminist community. The contributor had a chance to publicly address the community as a whole and offer her opinion on the importance of collectivity to feminist progress. She went on to write, “A negative attitude is one that shuns, for whatever reasons, a point of view that is not immediately accessible to one’s understanding. Certainly, such attitude can never be an aid to liberation! And yet, all too often I hear judgments passed in the feminist community...this schism only perpetuates our sorely atrophied personal and collective position.”⁹⁴ By acknowledging the factions within the movement the paper addressed the realities of both collective and individual identities while providing a public space for dialogue.

In addition to cultivating countywide discussion, *Runes* also served as an outreach tool to call attention to important issues, encourage action, and connect women with community events and resources. Each month the collective contacted local organizations to gather news on their progress and build a community calendar. The paper included

⁹³ Phyllis Berman, “Forum,” *Runes*, August 1976, 15.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

short reports on the varying community projects as well as longer articles that aimed to educate women and invite them to participate. Sometimes women involved in community organizations co-wrote articles about their work and their findings. For instance, in the August 1976 issue, The Women's Coalition Against Rape wrote an article to promote awareness of a local rape trial. They argued, "Here is an instance in which a group of men allegedly bonded together to perpetrate violence against a women. A gang rape is an expression of the communal power men have over the lives of women. In addition, it is an expression of the conquest of men over women..."⁹⁵ This coalition not only presented the facts of the trial, but also made a political statement about the implications of rape for all women. Additionally, they articulated their plans for action as the article went on to say, "Hence the feminist community in Northern California has moved to put pressure on the sheriff's department, the D.A.'s office and the judicial system. Feminists feel that only through our own organized efforts will these men be held accountable for their crimes against women."⁹⁶ Through articles like these, feminist coalitions publicized their activism and gain support.

The *Runes* collective combined informative stories with a feminist classified section that invited women to participate in many different activities. For example, the August 1976 advertisement reads, "A feminist-socialist study group is forming for women with working class (laborers, low income workers) and lower class (subsistence-welfare level) backgrounds...This will be a time to share our common and varied pasts for

⁹⁵ The Women's Coalition Against Rape, "Why People vs. Wiechman et. al. is Important," *Runes*, August 1976, 30.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

those of us who have felt out of step with the middle class around us. ⁹⁷ Right next to this announcement, another read, “A wine and cheese tasting will be held at the home of Nell Coddington on August 8 from 2-5p.m. Tickets are \$3, proceeds will go to the YWCA. The afternoon will include classical music, an art auction, and a house tour.”⁹⁸ These two announcements illustrate the vast spectrum of ideologies, tactics, and activities that the feminist community in Sonoma County embraced. By reading *Runes*, women were able to find their niche in the movement, their own way to ‘be a feminist’ or for many, their own way to ‘be a lesbian.’ In a way, *Runes* also demystified the feminist community. By reading the paper, women like the ‘Welfare Mother’ may have found that women she could relate to were actually involved in the movement. She may not have attended the wine and cheese fundraiser, but she may have found support with the feminist study group. The combination of the increasing number of feminist coalitions, the ever-expanding Women’s Studies program at Sonoma State College, and the connective force of *Runes*, generated a communal feminist identity. From 1970 to 1978, the number of feminist coalitions in Sonoma County skyrocketed as more and more women joined forces to enact change in their community.⁹⁹

As the feminist community grew in Sonoma County, the rumors about a northern California feminist sanctuary spread throughout national feminist circles. In addition, women across the nation and the Bay Area read and subscribed to *Runes*. This can be seen in the letters to the editor from women outside of Sonoma County. For example, In

⁹⁷ “Study Group,” *Runes*, August 1976, 13.

⁹⁸ “YWCA,” *Runes*, August 1976, 13.

⁹⁹ For a visual of the increase in community action and coalitions see, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, “Timeline of Sonoma County Women’s History,” <http://www.spflrc.org/~walker/sonomawomen/timeline.php> (accessed 29 May 2009).

the December 1976 issue, Laurie from Eugene, Oregon wrote, “Dear Sisters, Bravo! I really do enjoy reading your paper. Every issue is packed with good stuff: especially this last one on politics.”¹⁰⁰ One letter to the editor in the February 1977 issue read, “Dear Runes, I saw a few issues of *Runes* at the Wimmin in Print conference in Omaha and I liked it a lot. Thanks, Penny, New York”¹⁰¹ These letters show that *Runes* had an impact on women beyond Sonoma County. The paper invited women to events and publicized the feminist community. As a result of the rumors about the area, women visited Sonoma County to attend women-only dances, workshops, and meetings. Furthermore, women’s music thrived in Sonoma County, and as musicians toured throughout the country they spread word of the feminist community in Northern California.¹⁰² This news drew a large number of women to the area, creating an even larger and more varied feminist community.

Both straight and gay women made their way to the community for various reasons. For example, Mary Ruthsdotter, first visited Sonoma County with her husband in 1976, She remembered, “We took a vacation trip up this way to see Christo’s Running Fence and looked around and thought ‘my golly this is gorgeous, this is just gorgeous! I would love to live here.’ There was a university and it was close to San Francisco it had a lot of the things we were looking for. But also in the back of my mind it was Sonoma County and I was reading Ms. Magazine one time about the Equal Rights amendment and the difficulty getting it passes. They had published a list of States which had said that

¹⁰⁰ “Letters to the Editor,” *Runes*, December 1976, 2

¹⁰¹ “Letters to the Editor,” *Runes*, February 1977, 10

¹⁰² Holly Near, Chris Williamson, and Meg Christiansen all got their start in Sonoma County. Additionally, Olivia Records began in Petaluma, CA. For more on feminist and lesbian music see, Bonnie J. Morris, “Anyone Can Be a Lesbian: The Women’s Music Audience and Lesbian Politics,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 5 (4) (2001): 92-99.

employees could not spend money on travel to un-ratified ERA states...and in the list was one county in California, Sonoma County and I had no idea where that was but just the name Sonoma County stuck in my mind and to find out that this beautiful place was also Sonoma County, it must be right...”¹⁰³ Similarly, lesbians also flocked to Sonoma County. For many this was a way to reject their previous identities and this meant they came to Sonoma County to ‘come out.’ Debra Kelly reminisced, “As funny as this sounds now, I tell the story – I was told that there were lesbian farms up in Sonoma County and I wanted to come up here and go to school because I knew there was a lot of activity around Women’s Studies and that there was a really active lesbian community that was in a lot of the production of music and women’s culture and I wanted to be part of that and I was a kid, I mean relatively a kid.”¹⁰⁴ For Kelly, the move to Sonoma County was a way to articulate her newfound lesbian and feminist identity.

For many women, the move to Sonoma County itself became a central part of their coming out story. For instance, while describing her coming out story Cheryl Dunn said, “I had come out as a lesbian in San Francisco in ’74, ’75, and had met some women who lived here in Sonoma County who were – one was building a home and I was pretty amazed at this woman who was building her home and I wanted to come check that out. I heard that Sonoma County was a great place, lots of different women and various things happening in the county. So I came up and just visited people for a little bit and just fell

¹⁰³ Mary Ruthsdotter, interview by the author, 20 June 2007, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

¹⁰⁴ Kelly, 15 April 2008.

in love with the area, loved the Russian River – that’s when we'd get to go skinny-dipping in the Russian River [chuckle]. “¹⁰⁵

In addition to the women’s community, lesbians also flocked to Sonoma County because it was a rural area, and at the time there was a back-to-the-land push amongst lesbian communities. Nancy Moorhead recalled,

I came here in ‘77. I had just divorced and my partner at that time and my sister, we were all interested in living in kinda country, maybe communal living, and so we looked for property up here and we ended up buying ten acres up in Occidental, which was neither good growing land nor was it appropriate for any kind of communal living, but it got us up here, and so mainly, I guess I’d say it’s more being in the country. I’d heard of Sonoma County only a little bit, you know, but I knew there were women’s issues, women were active here to some degree. I was married for nine years and had two children, then I came out as a lesbian and got divorced. ¹⁰⁶

Morehead moved to Sonoma County for a combination of reasons that illuminate her identity formation. First, she moved to change her life, to get a new start over in a new place. Second, she had a desire to live in the country. This is partly because the back-to-the-land movement was in full swing, but it also provided her a way to re-invent herself. Third, she wanted to go somewhere that women were organizing and working together. Her move was connected to her coming out process and as a new lesbian she wanted to be in a lesbian and feminist friendly place. Mary Kowatch came to Sonoma County for similar reasons. She explained, “I first moved to Sonoma County in 1973 from Berkeley. I decided to move here partly because I wanted to go to school here, partly because I was coming out as a lesbian and I wanted to be in a lesbian community and I'd heard there was one up here, a good lesbian community up here, partly because I wanted to be in the

¹⁰⁵ Cheryl Dunn, interview by the author, 8 August 2008, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

¹⁰⁶ Nancy Moorhead. interview by Nora Winslow, 16 November 2006, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

country.”¹⁰⁷ Women like Kowatch moved to Sonoma County, a physical location, in order to honor the personal and political choices they were in the process of making. Their move represented a personal commitment to themselves and to all women.

Runes was just one of the many collectives that connected women to one another, encouraged action, and contributed to the shared sense of feminist identity in the area. As a literary space it was accessible for all women, not just those involved in the women’s community. Therefore it sparked dialogue, presented differing viewpoints, and invited women to become activists. *Runes* is emblematic of the integrative and multi-layered nature of activism in Sonoma County and beyond. As women re-defined their own identities they sought out community and combined forces with other women and in the process created a communal identity. The development of the newspaper and other coalitions along with the growing number of socially conscious women in the county led to a valuable feminist culture in Sonoma County. This culture was especially important because it was a launching pad for other coalitions, organizations, and services that focused on women’s equality, health, and education. It was particularly significant for lesbians because it was a safe place where they could explore the connection between sexuality and politics. Lesbianism was essential to this culture and therefore lesbians were essential to feminist action.

The growing culture allowed women to explore lesbian relationships and overcome the stereotypes associated with both gender and sexual identity. This is exemplified by Sheri Hoefling who stated, “A large part of the women’s movement

¹⁰⁷ Mary Kowatch, interview by the author, 14 April 2008, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

socially was for lesbians be able to build a niche really without fear of larger society.”¹⁰⁸

This fear-free niche was essential to both personal identity formation as well as communal action. As comfortable as this niche was, women eventually had to leave it as they entered into the larger community either for personal reasons or to work for change on the local level. As feminists left the women-only space and entered alternate environments, they once again questioned themselves and negotiated their identity. As lesbians left their communities, they had to decide whether or not to disclose their sexual identity. Historians often focus only on instances where lesbians verbalize this identity. However, by looking at the moments of silence we can begin to understand the reasons why the importance of sexual identity tends to be obscured in the master narrative of the women’s movement.

¹⁰⁸ Sheri Hoefling, interview by Brandon Buskirk, 7 December 2006, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

Chapter 3. "...And so it's a question...to disclose or not disclose?"-- Negotiating Lesbian Identity Outside of Feminist Cultural Space

One evening in 1972, Ruth Mahaney took her girlfriend on a date to The Monkey Pod, a local gay bar. Mahaney had recently accepted a job at Santa Rosa Junior College teaching a *Women in Social Change* course. The night sticks in her memory not because it was a particularly wonderful night, but rather because an incident that evening illustrated the fear that homosexuals, both lesbians and gay men, faced. She explained,

I remember actually one night a friend of mine came up from the city who was somebody I was dating and we went to the Monkey Pod, which is a gay bar – mostly gay men but lesbians were there sometimes.... We were sitting in the Monkey Pod and there was a huge crash outside and a car had hit my car that was parked right in front of the Monkey Pod– it was a sports car and it had hit it really hard and it had gone under my car and so my car was like perched on top of his car. He was so drunk that he wasn't even hurt...

The accident was completely by chance, and although Mahaney was upset about her car, she was not specifically worried about the implications on her professional life. However, the next day the newspaper ran a story about the incident, which she believed, could have publicly 'outed' her: "The next day there was a photograph of [the car] sitting right in front of the Monkey Pod, and it said that it was my car. So I was very nervous about it."¹⁰⁹ Mahaney was worried that her new co-workers or students might read the story and use it against her. Although Mahaney was 'out' at the time, she was still fearful of the consequences she could face due to her sexual identity. This was partly due to fear for her own personal safety but even more so because her goal was to emphasize women's rights and empower her students. She didn't want her personal life to de-legitimize her teaching. As the women's community in Sonoma County grew, Mahaney and other

¹⁰⁹ Mahaney, 11 March 2008.

lesbians created a safe haven to express their lesbian identity. Nevertheless, as women left the comfort of this community to reach out to other women, develop their careers, or just live their day-to-day lives, they faced a predicament of disclosure just as Mahaney did in the aftermath of her evening at the Monkey Pod.

At this point in time, the gay community was in flux. On one hand, gay men and women were embracing their sexuality, and some were publicly expressing their identities. In fact, one of the tactics of the gay rights movement was to ‘come out’ in order to create a visible community of homosexuals. However, a good portion of the public still openly opposed homosexuality. Although it made sense in theory to publicly come out, individuals had to balance their personal safety and comfort with what was best for the movement. Although lesbians and gay men started to understand themselves in a different light, they still had to continually decide whether or not to reveal their sexual preference. This meant that they carefully navigated their experiences, continually re-evaluating their surroundings and their personal actions. Ann Neel remembered that “it [was] a question, are you gonna disclose or not disclose. And where do you, and how do you and...for most people before the movement...you would be very careful what you [did] and [didn’t] do. I mean not only because you might lose your job but because you [didn’t] wanna mess with it. It is a lot of trouble. Other people’s reactions, is their problem. I finally figured that out. But you don’t know that when you are young.”¹¹⁰ As Neel pointed out, both the women’s and gay rights movements improved the situation for homosexuals.

¹¹⁰ Ann Neel, interview by the author, 24 April 2008, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

The women's movement provided important resources for lesbian women. Like many straight women, lesbians did not rely on the support of a man so equality in the workplace and beyond was essential to their survival. The organizations that grew out of the women's movement supported the day-to-day lives of lesbians. Mary Kowatch remembered that prior to the women's movement, going to a doctor was a difficult task as a lesbian. She explained, "It wasn't easy to go into a OB-GYN and say, 'I'm a lesbian.' When they asked you who your partners were and did you want condoms it was like – 'what's your birth control and why aren't you using it?' It's like; do you tell them you're a lesbian, do you not? What are they going to do if you tell them you are? It was big and it kept people away, people didn't go to doctors, women didn't go to doctors and lesbians didn't go to male doctors especially."¹¹¹ In an attempt to address this dilemma, feminist coalitions opened their own clinics for women. This provided lesbians with a safe-space to access medical care while also giving straight women a place to discuss their health. Through education and organization the feminist community provided a haven for lesbians. While lesbians found safe-space in the women's movement, gay men developed their own communities where they could explore the meaning of sexuality in their own lives. As both communities re-defined themselves in reaction to theory and individual experience they created safe environments where the 'personal was political' and 'gay was good'.¹¹² This inward embrace was crucial to gay men and lesbians

¹¹¹ Mary Kowatch, interview by the author, 14 April 2008, Carol Hanish, "The Personal is Political" in *Notes from the Second Year Women's Liberation: Major Writings of the Radical Feminists*. Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt eds., (New York: Radical Feminism, 1970 accessed 10 April 2009) Available from <http://scholar.alexanderstreet.com/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=2259>

¹¹² The phrase "Gay is Good" was adopted by the gay liberation movement in 1968. It served a similar purpose as slogans like "Black is Beautiful." Historian Margaret

because it helped them personally recast homosexuality not as a vulgar and deviant practice, but rather as a legitimate sexual identity. Although both movements improved the situation for the gay community, individuals still faced a predicament of disclosure when they interacted with the heterosexual public.

Even though both lesbians and gay men were in the process of re-defining themselves and their communities, there was little collaboration between gay men and women at this time. Many lesbians had initially joined the homophile movement in the aftermath of Stonewall in 1969; however, they felt that their ideas were continually dismissed even in the progressive environment of social activism.¹¹³ When they called attention to the problem they were accused of trying to divide the movement. Feeling unappreciated and unheard, lesbians left to explore the women's movement.¹¹⁴ Besides this initial divide, gay men and lesbians also disagreed on the meaning of the movement. Often lesbians saw the gay male focus on sexuality as perpetuating negative stereotypes surrounding homosexuality. Gay men saw the efforts of lesbian feminists as an attempt to obscure the importance of sex. In her history of gay and lesbian liberation, historian Margaret Cruikshank wrote, "To gay men, feminism has sometimes seemed as an anti-sex movement, while lesbians have viewed gay men as hedonists."¹¹⁵ Although the divide sometimes hindered the unity of the gay community, it gave both factions a chance

Cruikshank explains that the term assert that being gay was, "—not just acceptable, not just something to tolerate, but a positive identity." Margaret Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 91.

¹¹³ See Martin and Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman*, SOMETHING MISSING

¹¹⁴ Barry D. Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1987), 92-35.

¹¹⁵ Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement*, 177.

to re-create themselves independently. This period of separation later gave way to a stronger coalition for gay rights.

The women's movement legitimized lesbianism as essential for change. Lesbian feminists argued that sexual identity was an essential part of women's liberation. In an article in *Ms.* magazine in 1975, Jill Johnson proclaimed, "Feminism at heart is a massive complaint. Lesbianism is the solution."¹¹⁶ This statement manifested itself into a slogan for lesbian feminism and transformed the face of the movement. For lesbians who were already out, this affirmed their personal decisions. Additionally this ideology gave rise to a new group of women who came out as a part of their feminist transformation. As the lesbian community grew women had to learn how to negotiate their identities. Both new and experienced lesbians had to decide when, where, and how to present themselves as both feminists and lesbians.

Lesbian action was vital to the growth and survival of the women's movement but often lesbians chose not to reveal their sexual identities in their actions. However, this identity was central to their activism. From the outside looking in it is possible to overlook lesbian action, or to dismiss their sexual identity as a side note. Feminist lesbians defined their identity as a personal commitment to women in all areas of their lives. This means that although women understood their feminist and lesbian identity to be inseparable, they tended to emphasize their feminist position when they interacted with the larger community. Women understood feminism as an all-encompassing theory that touched every part lives. Therefore, they continually evaluated their actions in light of that theory. In an article in *Runes* from 1977 Robin Gail wrote,

¹¹⁶ Jill Johnston. "Are Lesbians Gay?," *Ms.* 3 (12) (1973), quoted in Barry D. Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 89.

“Feminist Consciousness is like the narrow part of an hourglass, a point of focus through which all our thoughts, ideas, and experiences must pass, to be changed and clarified in the process. Being a feminist is to realize that every single aspect of our lives needs to be examined in the light of revolutionary, woman-identified, anti-patriarchal awareness.”¹¹⁷ In the face of this popular view of feminist consciousness, the fear of lesbian baiting, and the idea that lesbianism was the correct feminist practice, lesbians had to decide whether to emphasize lesbianism or feminism in their public identities.

In a way, lesbians lived in liminal reality. Living between a woman-centered world where they could be open about their sexuality and a world where they had to continually appraise their surroundings and their actions, lesbians negotiated their identity as both a personal and political tactic. As these women passed between worlds, they altered the outward presentation in order to promote feminist ideals and articulate their personal commitment to women. Remembering this negotiation, Trish Nugent explained, “A lot of things [were] overlapping political causes that gay women labeled feminist... there was a lot of—and still is a lot of—overlap.”¹¹⁸ By examining moments when lesbians chose to conceal their sexual identities we can start to see the often hidden impact of lesbians on the women’s movement as they fueled women’s organizations and paved the road for women’s equality.

By looking at identity negotiation we can begin to breakdown the appearance of a hegemonic narrative. We can start to see how oppositional groups, such as lesbians, not only contributed to the narrative, but also in fact, completely changed the narrative.

¹¹⁷ Robin Gail, “On Loving...” *Runes* February 1977, 1.

¹¹⁸ Trish Nugent, interview by Brandy Royce, 17 May 2007, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

Looking at the past through their eyes, from their standpoint, reveals a new picture of the women's movement and the gay right's movement. This picture demonstrates the interconnectivity of the personal conception of ones own identity, the group identity, and the flow of action. Oral History provides us a way to observe the way these individuals negotiate their identity and actions both in the past and in the present.¹¹⁹

In Sonoma County, lesbians faced the predicament of disclosure in various ways; however, two types of circumstances seemed the most prevalent. First, lesbians encountered this dilemma when they stepped out of the woman-centered community to provide women's resources to the larger community. Second, lesbians also encountered this dilemma as they entered into the workforce in non-traditional fields. In both circumstances, lesbians tried to articulate their feminist identity in order to enact change. As Nugent put it, they were lesbian women labeling their actions feminist.¹²⁰

Since the goal of feminism was to enact change, women's organizations attracted the public eye quite often. Therefore, organizations were concerned with the public image they presented. Lesbians involved in these organizations often chose not to present their lesbian identity because they did not want their personal life to discredit the movement.

¹¹⁹ This chapter draws on works by many influential feminist theorists. In particular, Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984), Chela Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism" in *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), Cherrie Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983). These theorists posit that women of color, specifically lesbian women of color, live in between worlds. Anzaldúa calls this space "La Frontera" or the "Borderland." Sandoval labels the practice of identity negotiation as "Differential Consciousness." The ability to flow between different modes of feminism (i.e. the equal-rights form, revolutionary form, supremacist form, separatist form, and differential form) allows women of color to employ different tactics in order to best oppose the hegemonic structures of our society.

¹²⁰ Nugent, 17 May 2007.

Molly Murphy MacGregor was one of the founders of the National Women's History Project and served as the executive director for the organization. Although she came out as a lesbian at Sonoma State College, she chose to conceal this part of her life in her work with the project. She explained, "The last thing in the world I ever wanted anybody to know in my public life was that I was a lesbian because I didn't want to taint the National Women's History Project with lesbianism and neither did my colleagues. Let me tell you, they were hyper sensitive about the fact that anybody would think that we were a lesbian organization."¹²¹ The women she worked with were aware of her sexual identity and in fact some of them were also lesbians. However, they did not want their actions to ever be labeled as lesbian rather than feminist. MacGregor remembered that her colleagues "were just sure if we ever used any of the colors of lavender or anything like that people would assume that we were lesbians. I traveled all over the country so it was really kind of a life I just got used to, that nobody – they just assumed that I was married or dating or whatever. No one ever assumed I was a lesbian."¹²² This hypersensitivity demonstrates the fear of lesbian baiting that feminist organizations encountered. Activists understood that despite the lesbian feminist theory, the majority of the public was not ready to accept homosexuality. Since their primary goal was to improve the lives of women, lesbians carefully negotiated when and where they expressed their sexual identity.

As the head of the National Women's History project, Molly MacGregor worked with women all over the country. Sometimes she worked with feminist organizations, and

¹²¹ Molly Murphy MacGregor, interview with the author, 17 October 2008, Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

¹²² Ibid.

other times she worked with schools and educational programs. Towards the late 1970s when MacGregor and her colleagues founded their collective, there was an intense national debate surrounding homosexuality and education. In 1977, Anita Bryant, a famous singer, publicly campaigned against an ordinance that would prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in Dade County, Florida. Bryant argued that the ordinance put children at risk since homosexuals would try to recruit children.¹²³ The message of her highly publicized campaign spread across the country. Since the National Women's History Project focus was education, MacGregor and her counterparts believed that their organization would be discredited if they disclosed their sexual orientation. "For me it was always walking that line about making sure that people wouldn't think that we were doing women's history because we were lesbians. It was that women's history wasn't about lesbianism..." She recalled that even years after the anti-gay campaigns of the late 1970s, she was still hesitant to address homosexuality in her organization,

I think we started doing the education conference in 1984 and I think it took me almost five years, maybe longer, before I actually incorporated a lesbian speaker. I talked about homophobia as a generic kind of thing but given the impact that homophobia has on our kids in schools it needed to be more than that. But part of it was I didn't want school districts to not let the teacher come because the word "homophobia" was on any kind of brochure. Even so, it took me about four or five years before I actually had a lesbian come in and talk about what it was like for her growing up in the schools being a lesbian. So there was all this kind of carefulness. It's been a slow process.¹²⁴

MacGregor's experience highlights the way that lesbians moved between worlds in order to promote an image that advanced their feminist goals. Since the focus of the National

¹²³ Michael Castleman, "Proposition 6 and the Rights of Us All," *The Nation*, October 27, 1978, 403.

¹²⁴ Macgregor, 17 October 2008.

Women's History Project was on education, the founders had to appeal to parents, legislators, and teachers. To do so they suppressed radical aspects of feminism and presented an agenda that worked within the system already in place.

Lesbians involved in service organizations also had to alter the outward expression of their identity throughout their activism. Like MacGregor, many concealed their sexual identity for the good of the movement. Although they viewed lesbianism as essential to feminism, they felt that calling attention to it was not always beneficial for themselves or other women. Women avoided public expression of their gay identity since the term 'lesbian' conjured negative stereotypes. For example, Barbara Bochinski explained that initially she did not come out to her family, not because she was afraid but rather because they wouldn't understand what 'lesbianism' meant to her, "If my family had lived closer and I had seen them more often I would have come out to them gradually, but it's hard when you live far away. It just is harder. You don't want to tell your folks on the phone. I didn't feel that bad about it because I felt if I called up my folks and said, 'I'm a lesbian,' I wouldn't really be telling the truth in a way because they would just imagine the worst things or stereotypes. They wouldn't be really knowing me. So I waited."¹²⁵ Similarly, lesbians involved in activism understood that disclosure could hurt their organizations and coalitions since so many people understood homosexuality to be a form of deviance.

Ruth Mahaney watched many of her students (both at the Junior College and later at Sonoma State) form and join feminist coalitions in the community. She pointed out

¹²⁵ Barbara Bochinski, interview by the author, 9 October 2007, Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

that although a large majority of them were lesbians, most of the organizations were designed for all women. Mahaney stated,

A lot of the organizations that got started in Sonoma County were actually started by lesbians but they started them as women's organizations... There were just a couple that were really just lesbian organizations. Almost all of them were for women in general and worked and functioned, I think, quite well. From the very beginning women were told to not say they were lesbians in those organizations.¹²⁶

This can also be seen in some of the informal publications from the period. For example, in 1976 Lillian Bern published a *Feminist Yellow Pages of Sonoma County* to connect women with the plethora of feminist energy in the area. The twenty-page booklet lists county organizations, workshops, publications, trades, and women groups. Even though a large number of women involved in these organizations considered themselves 'woman-identified', the term 'lesbian' is only mentioned twice, once in an advertisement for a play in New York and in the description of a feminist study group. The Lesbian Alliance was the only Sonoma County listing to actually address sexual orientation. Their listing read, "We evolve as our community members make their priorities know. We are woven together with other groups and individuals, not only lesbians—for example, with the hot-line project. Though many groups are largely lesbian, it is our specific purpose to represent lesbian interests in the women's and mixed communities. We put our name out for the world to get used to."¹²⁷ This statement shows us that lesbians were involved in many different types of activities, yet they could not always disclose themselves.

Therefore, the goal of the Lesbian Alliance was to begin to present lesbianism not as something to be hidden or feared, but rather as a viable political identity. The fact that

¹²⁶ Mahaney, 11 March 2008.

¹²⁷ Lillian Bern, *Summer 1976 Feminist Yellow Pages of Sonoma County* (Santa Rosa: Feminist Yellow Pages of Sonoma County, 1976) 19.

sexual orientation is only mentioned in this one listing could lead researchers to believe that it was just a part of the movement, a side note. Personal accounts from women involved in the movement help us read between the lines to see that sexuality and the decision whether or not to present that identity had a huge impact on the feminist movement.

Many members of feminist organizations purposely chose to conceal their lesbianism. In doing so, they hoped to create an open and inviting space where all women would feel welcome. Mahaney remembered,

I had a student at the JC...her mother was a battered woman and she went to the shelter and [my student] went with her, she was like 16 or something...The shelter people got nervous because [my student] was reading a lesbian novel. She came to my class and was very clear that she was a young lesbian. She was reading a lesbian novel at the shelter and the staff got very upset with her and told her they didn't want her to read that there and it became a huge issue because much more than half the staff were lesbians. So the staff was nervous, even some of the lesbians were nervous about her doing this, yet she was a client...They were afraid of being seen as a lesbian organization because straight women wouldn't come. It was very strong. I don't know if it was actually said or how it was actually dealt with but there was a very strong message that nobody should let anybody know that you were a lesbian...they said it was for the good of the clients The contradiction I saw was this student [was] a client. They were saying, "Clients won't think this is a place that they feel safe in if they know it's all lesbians, there are a lot of lesbians."¹²⁸

Ironically, in cultural activities the feminist goal was to create safe-space for all women, in particular lesbians; however, in service organizations lesbians had to suppress their identities in order to create safe-space for straight women. This contradiction lies at the heart of the predicament of disclosure. On one hand, lesbians wanted to explore and express their sexual identity, but on the other they felt it

¹²⁸ Mahaney, 11 March 2008.

necessary to suppress this identity in order to make progress for all women.

Mahaney went on to explain why this occurred,

I think it was much more a PR thing, women need a shelter where they feel safe and if they know its lesbians they're not going to feel safe because of homophobia, because of their homophobia. It would make it so that straight women [wouldn't] feel like they could actually utilize the service if they know that most of [the staff were] lesbians, so it was very secretive. It was true for the rape group, it was true for the clinic, it was true for all the service things...lesbians were told to try to stay in the closet because these were institutions that straight women needed and that they would not be able to utilize if they knew we were lesbians. It was a strong message.¹²⁹

This message, in effect, silenced lesbian identity for the good of the movement.

Outside of feminist organizations and coalitions, lesbians also had to negotiate their identities and choose when and where to disclose. This occurred in day-to-day activities like going to the store, walking down the street, visiting friends and family, or attending public functions. However, identity negotiation can be seen best in the workplace. At this time there was a large push for women to take on non-traditional jobs, made possible through government legislation and funding. In 1973, Congress passed enacted the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) to train women in non-traditional careers and trades. CETA also provided funding for many of the feminist non-profits that emerged during this time.¹³⁰ This was a huge victory for feminism as it allowed women to enter into new fields and go confront traditional gender assumptions. Women who chose these jobs fought for change in a different way than those who ran feminist

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Discussed in Pat Kuta, interview by Lisa Zapolski, 26 April 2007, Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA. See, Grace A Franklin and Randall B. Ripley, *CETA: Politics and Policy, 1972-1982* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).

organizations or fostered feminist culture. In effect, they were ambassadors for change, serving on the front line where gender assumptions ran rampant.

Women who chose this path articulated their equality with men by securing jobs as mechanics, plumbers, electricians, or contractors. Perhaps even more than lesbians working in feminist organizations, lesbians in non-traditional jobs had to evaluate their situation and their outward appearance constantly. Cheryl Dunn's memories illustrate the predicament of disclosure that women faced in the workforce. Dunn was one of the first women hired by the local cable company to work as a mechanic on service vehicles. She remembered that when she started,

...they didn't think that I could do it or any woman could do it. I got a lot of jokes and a lot of snide remarks. At the time, you go into these places into the shops and there'd be *Playboy* calendars on the walls and posters up. But the phone company very quickly got their act together and made it illegal or against their rules to put girlie kind of things up on the walls. I remember there were times when I would go into a restroom – because they didn't have women's and men's restroom, they had a restroom. So I would go into a restroom and there'd be some girlie thing on the wall and then I'd come out and I'd go complain and say, "It's offensive, you need to get that down," and they pretty much had to. Pretty much had to because if they were going to have women in the workplace – I mean the phone company's a big enough corporation, big enough business that they knew that they would have to do something to accommodate these women they were hiring, so they were fairly decent about it.¹³¹

By entering a male dominated profession Dunn challenged traditional stereotypes about women. She also called attention to the prevalence of sexism in the workplace. The legislation in place required companies to train and hire women, which opened up new doors for women to enhance their own lives and put their ideologies into practice.

¹³¹ Cheryl Dunn, interview by the author, 8 August 2008, Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

However, lesbians in non-traditional jobs often hid their sexual identity just as activists did in other arenas. Dunn explained,

In my heart and in my gut I was just kind of dying because here I was a lesbian. I would not come out at my job. That was one thing I was not willing to do. It was hard enough being a woman but to be a lesbian on top of it, I just – I wouldn't go there. So I think all in all from the women's point of view I did okay because I proved myself to them...that I could do what I was supposed to do. I was dependable and I worked hard and I got the reputation that I was more dependable and more – conscientious than any of my male counterparts in that job. They could see that I was working really hard and for the most part I did gain a lot of respect from them...But it was mostly my internal strife, my internal struggle that I went through about how much of myself I was hiding and concealing and not sharing...It was hard enough to just find my way in there as a woman and to add that to it, I just wasn't willing to face it, it was just too hard. Looking back, when I say I did okay as a woman, I feel like I did do okay but the price was high.¹³²

Although Dunn made great strides for women in her profession, she had to conceal her sexual identity in order to gain respect from men she worked with. If she revealed her sexuality, she feared that her efforts would be discredited, so she kept quiet. Dunn and other women who entered into non-traditional careers served as ambassadors for change. In the process they endured a constant struggle of fluctuate between worlds in hopes that the road would be easier for women who followed in their footsteps.

While some lesbians closeted themselves in order to forge the road for women's equality, others did not believe that it was necessary or beneficial to always focus on sexuality. For example, Jeanette Keesling-Morretti believed that sexual identity was not something that should be discussed in the workplace. She stated,

Truly, you know, whatever someone's sexual practices are, why on earth would that be a part of their work? And heterosexual people, nobody walks up and says, 'Oh, hello my name is Jim Bob or Mary Jane. What kind of sex do you have at home?' It's like, how crazy is that? And that's kind of how I see it. I'm

¹³² Ibid.

just living a life and who I live with is a woman. My identity, it just doesn't matter to you. It shouldn't. But if it becomes political about women's right to earn a dollar for a dollar, about women's right to progress in their career, to be supervisors, to be considered moral versus amoral . . . then I'm all about that.¹³³

Keesling-Moretti's opinion illustrates why feminist action is apparent in the exploration of the past, while lesbian identity is often a slippery category to address.

Looking to primary sources we see women who might identify as lesbian, but it is hard to understand the importance of this identity without their memories. For example, a 1983 Working Women publication titled "Scrapbook of Sonoma County Tradeswoman" documented the lives of sixteen Sonoma County women yet never once mentioned sexual orientation. Given the large number of lesbian women involved in the feminist movement and non-traditional jobs, it is likely that at least a few of these women identified as lesbians. In fact, Nancy Moorhead, one of the women highlighted in the book, later founded the Lesbian Voters Action Caucus of Sonoma County. Nevertheless, women kept their sexual identity out of the discussions of the workplace. One of the issues the scrapbook addressed was the difficulty of working in a non-traditional field. Many of the women explained that they encountered discrimination on a day-to-day basis and they had to work twice as hard as men to be taken seriously. This is similar to the issues that Dunn described. However, none of the women speak to the dilemma of sexual disclosure that Dunn so eloquently expressed. Without her words, and more importantly her historical view of her personal past, this internal struggle is lost. This begs the question of how many women in the scrapbook also shared this struggle in order to improve the lives

¹³³ Jeanette Keesling-Morretti, interview by Christy Zwingle, 27 April 2007, Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

of women to come and, if asked about this period today, how many would highlight their lesbian identity as integral to their action?¹³⁴

Women's culture served as a refuge for many lesbians who had to conceal their sexual identities in the public realm. After long days working in the public eye, lesbians relied on cafes, concerts, bookstores, and bars for an outlet where they could openly express their personal desires. Since this is where the term 'lesbian' is most often used in primary sources such as songs, pamphlets, or letters, lesbians enter the master narrative as proponents of cultural feminism. However, the exploration of the Sonoma County women's movement reveals that lesbians were actually the movers and shakers in many different forms of activism, not only in the growth of women-center cultural community. By labeling many of their actions 'feminist,' lesbians crossed between worlds and privileged the struggle for women's equality, but as time went on this too changed. As anti-gay opinions grew towards the end of the 1970s, lesbians had to once again re-evaluate their lives and decide how to present their identity. In 1978, a California legislative initiative motivated many lesbians to outwardly fight for gay equality. For many, this was the first time they saw themselves as part of the gay community and as a result they chose to speak out about their sexual identities. This shift in consciousness greatly impacted both the women's and gay rights movements.

¹³⁴ Sandra Sweitzer, ed., *Scrapbook of Sonoma County Tradeswomen* (Santa Rosa: Working Women Inc., 1981).

Chapter 4. “In Sonoma County Queers Have Fears Because Walls Have Ears”--

Shifting Concerns, Shifting Identities

In 1978, California legislator John Briggs sponsored a state proposition to ban gays and anyone who supported gay rights from working with children in the public school system. Following in Anita Bryant’s footsteps, Briggs argued that the public acceptance of homosexuality threatened the traditional nuclear family and put American children at risk. Preceding proposition six (or the Briggs Initiative) cities and counties throughout the nation had passed similar laws; however, this was the first American proposal to limit the rights of homosexuals on a statewide level. In addition, it persecuted anyone who supported gay rights, regardless of sexual orientation. Across the state gay men and women, rose up in arms about the blatant infringement on their civil rights. The Briggs initiative was a reminder of the homophobia the gay community still faced despite the strides both gay men and lesbians made in the past decade. Moreover, the proposition served as a turning point for the gay community as it revealed the importance of banding together to form a visible political faction.

In Sonoma County, the proposition hit home when Briggs outed a local kindergarten teacher and used him as a poster boy for the campaign. Gay men and women in the community were already concerned about the implications of the proposition, but Briggs attack on ‘one of their own’ propelled a countywide fight to defeat the initiative. Despite previous divisions, men and women worked together to launch the Sonoma County Residents Against Proposition Six, or SCRAP 6. Following

the lead of San Francisco politician Harvey Milk and activist Sally Gearhart, SCRAP 6 organized a counter-campaign to support local gay teachers and educate the heterosexual community.¹³⁵ Trish Nugent, a feminist singer and songwriter, remembered, “Of course in Sonoma County there was a No On Briggs campaign, and I worked on that campaign doing some door-to-door work and sang at a couple of the rallies...and wrote a song something like, ‘Up here in Sonoma County queers have fears; queers fear because walls have ears.’”¹³⁶ Nugent’s lyrics illustrate how SCRAP 6 transformed the debate from a discussion about the immorality of homosexuality to one about individual freedom and democracy. In essence, homosexuals drew together to politicize their sexual identity just as lesbians had done earlier in the women’s movement.

Leading up to this historical moment, gay men and lesbians created community in their separate spheres. These communities provided a safe space where people could explore their sexuality without fear of persecution, and as a result homosexuals started to understand their sexuality not as a crime or as immoral but as legitimate and acceptable. Cheryl Dunn recalled that this period of internal incubation was extremely important to the development of a strong political movement. She explained, “It was exciting to feel that things were beginning to change, even though the attitudes towards gays and lesbians hadn’t begun to change much, but the attitudes of the gays and lesbians were changing. That’s what was so big. The whole idea of breaking out of [our] own chains was what

¹³⁵ Harvey Milk was the first openly gay elected politician in San Francisco. Sally Gerheart was a Women and Gender Studies professor at San Francisco State University and political activist. See Arthur David Kahn, *The Many Faces of Gay: Activists who are Changing the Nation* (Westport: Praeger, 1997).

¹³⁶ Trish Nugent, interview by Brandy Royce, 17 May 2007, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

was so big. It's only been recently where the greater communities at large have been breaking out of their chains, but back then we had to break out first."¹³⁷

In addition to encouraging homosexuals to come out to their immediate communities, a faction of the gay community was also working for change on a bureaucratic level. They followed along the same lines as the civil right and women's rights activists, arguing that gay people were a minority group that deserved equal treatment just as much as any other group of people. In an article on the development of gay rights, scholar Fred Fejes states,

The older media images of homosexuals as criminals and sickos were now being replaced by more neutral and even positive portrayals. Similar to laws on segregation, laws restricting the rights of homosexuals were now viewed as outmoded and unjust, and states were moving to repeal them. Instead, cities and counties across the country were banning discrimination at the local level. By January 1977, over thirty cities and counties had some type of law or policy barring discrimination against lesbians and gay men.¹³⁸

As the winds of change blew across the country, a backlash against the gay community arose.

By the end of 1977, Anita Bryant's 'Save Our Children' campaign generated fear in the minds of many Americans, and in Dade County, Florida, voters repealed gay rights legislation. Soon politicians backed away as it became clear that a vote for gay rights could cost them a large portion of supporters. Even the media started to look at gay rights with a skeptical eye. The growing counter-movement gained national attention and reminded the gay community that homophobia was still very present in their lives. Fejes goes on to ask, "If lesbians and gay men were no longer viewed as a minority deserving

¹³⁷ Dunn, 8 August 2008.

¹³⁸ Fred Fejes "Briggs Initiative goes National," *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide*. 15 (2008): 21.

of protection against discrimination, what was their status in American Society? Was the fledgling progress of the 70s about to be replaced by an era of Jim Crow-style legislation? It seemed so. States from Alabama to New Jersey began considering measures to re-criminalize homosexuality and further restrict the rights of lesbians and gay men.”¹³⁹ Seeing an opportunity to play on the public’s fear, Briggs jumped on the conservative bandwagon; however, his proposition was the final straw for homosexuals. Just like Stonewall had been a ‘shot heard round the world’ a decade earlier, the Briggs Initiative served as ammunition for action.¹⁴⁰

As anti-gay sentiments grew across the country, lesbians and gay men began to realize that in order to fight injustice they would have to disclose their individual and communal identities. The threat of Proposition Six demonstrated mobilized gays to reach beyond their existing tactics and develop stronger representation on a bureaucratic level. In October 1978, John Briggs argued, “God said to go forth and bear children. That’s what heterosexual people do. I have never known a homosexual family to have children. The only way they can increase their flock is to take from ours.”¹⁴¹ As important as culture and community were for the personal coming out process, in order to appeal to the masses and repel claims such as these, the gay community needed a visible presence in the legislative process. On October 21, 1978, just a few weeks before California voters went to the polls, a journalist for *Nation* wrote, “In recent years, the New Right has won significant political victories by organizing around issues involving sexual politics. The appeal is not to voters’ pocketbooks, the traditional conservative approach, but to their

¹³⁹ Ibid, 22.

¹⁴⁰ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 195.

¹⁴¹ Castleman, “Proposition 6 and the Rights of us All,” 403.

moral outrage at what conservatives call ‘the disintegration of the American Family’. According to Donald Sizemore, Briggs’s administrative assistant, ‘You can see the demise of the family in societies that encourage homosexuality—like Rome.’”¹⁴² Since the New Right attempted to appeal to moral convictions, gay coalitions sought to demystify homosexuality by putting a human face to the name. In addition, they shifted paradigms to appeal to democratic rights rather than morality. They formed coalitions with straight teachers, politicians, labor unions, and schools to argue that the Proposition Six would ground bigotry in the law of the state, making oppression legal.

This moment can be seen as a crossroads for lesbians in Sonoma County. Thus far, lesbians more often than not chose to privilege their feminist identity in public situations, but in order to fight against the proposition they had to reveal their sexual identity. This presented a difficult decision for many lesbians, as they had to choose which aspect of their identity to favor. Some women chose to continue to conceal their sexual orientation for the good of the movement while a good portion decided to get on board with the fight for homosexual freedom. In doing so, lesbians kept one foot in women’s activism and stepped with the other into the gay liberation movement. In this process, lesbians shifted the way they defined themselves and the world around them.

In Sonoma County, lesbians and gay men had worked together briefly in the past on various issues, including the 1972 protest of *The Killing of Sister George*, a play at the Junior College, which many thought perpetuated negative stereotypes of lesbians.¹⁴³ However, for the most part the two communities kept to themselves. Mary Williams

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ann Neel, interview by the author, 21 March 2008, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

recalled that in fact there was quite a bit of tension between lesbians and gay men. She explained, “They were men after all! They were disgusting!...We were just as bad as the straight community in castigating gay men about...they are all about sex...can't they keep their pants?”¹⁴⁴ Starting in 1978, the tension began to subside as the gay male community and lesbian community started to see that they were in the same camp and needed each other in order to secure civil liberties. Instead of only seeing themselves as woman-identified, lesbians started to see themselves as gay-identified women.

The outrage in Sonoma County began when a local teacher was thrust into the national spotlight when the Briggs Campaign highlighted him as an example of gay immorality. Ruth Mahaney was teaching at Sonoma State University at the time. She recalled,

First of all, the display case for the anti-gay people was a schoolteacher who was in Healdsburg, a gay man who was a teacher, an elementary school teacher, in Healdsburg. He was outed, he didn't out himself. He was outed because the Briggs Initiative discovered him and used him as a case to talk about why gay people shouldn't teach. I think Sonoma County did a fabulous job; they were amazing in their organizing around this issue. One of the things they did was help him. He was a very shy guy; he was not somebody who was flamboyant and very out. He had never been a public speaker and suddenly he was being called upon to speak because he was suddenly in the limelight all the time.¹⁴⁵

SCRAP 6 developed in order to support local teachers like this man and to educate the public. When the Healdsburg school teach was asked to speak publicly, women and men formed a support group to coach him on how to best present the gay rights arguments and defend himself. Cass Smith remembered that at one point John Briggs traveled to

¹⁴⁴ Mary Williams, interview by the author, 10 June 2008, Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

¹⁴⁵ Mahaney, 11 March 2008.

Healdsburg to meet with supporters, and SCRAP 6 took advantage of the opportunity to organize a debate and a rally. She explained,

We organized a debate between this man and John Briggs. And we let John Briggs supporters choose the location for this debate and they picked the Villa Chanticleer in Healdsburg, which was a nice venue but quite small and we knew that there was likely to be more people there than would be likely to fit inside the building. So we again worked with the Healdsburg police and set up loud speakers outside so that people who could not get into the building could hear the speech and... on the far side of the lawn area we set up risers for a stage with speakers and microphones and everything. And the moment that the debate finished the rally on the far side started.¹⁴⁶

The urgency of the situation fostered a dynamic coalition that worked tirelessly to organize debates in order to eventually defeat Briggs and secure their freedom.

In this moment, lesbians leveraged their previous experience organizing for the women-centered causes to coordinate opposition. Mahaney recalled that SCRAP 6, “was certainly dominated and run by mostly lesbians but there was support. There was actually a lot of support.”¹⁴⁷ Lesbians also were very vocal at the rallies and protests. Cass Smith recounted an incident that took place after the debate SCRAP 6 organized:

We...formed a human fence on the stage side of the driveway so that the police could escort Briggs out and get him into a car and drive him away. And this all went quite well until Briggs told his driver to stop the car and Briggs got out and walked over to the crowd on the far side of the human fence and walked up to a woman. And I spoke to the woman later and she said when he walked up to her he said, “Now that you have seen me up close, am I that scary?” And she replied to him, “Now that you have seen me up close, am I that scary?” And he then turned and got back into his car and drove off.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Cass Smith, interview by Kelly Caveney, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

¹⁴⁷ Mahaney, 11 March 2008.

¹⁴⁸ Cass Smith, SOMETHING MISSING.

Despite the cruel attacks Briggs made on the gay community, SCRAP 6 was determined to keep their activism peaceful and professional. Nevertheless, lesbians were willing to speak up when approached, just as this woman did.

In addition to organizing rallies, SCRAP 6 also reached out to the larger community by going door-to-door as a form of education. The conversation activists had with the public were perhaps the most important tactic of the counter-campaign because they humanize the issue at hand. For lesbian participants, this experience was important because it directly connected them with gay men. Despite previous divisions or stereotypes that men and women held of one another they worked together, thus altering the way they understood one another. Mahaney explained,

Proposition 6 is when we [men and women] worked together a lot... Sonoma County was very strong – much stronger than in San Francisco – in having lesbians be in the leadership... Also there was a campaign to go door-to-door in Sonoma County, which was an amazing campaign, they just knocked cold on doors and asked if they could talk to them about Proposition 6 and were often invited in. The committee made a point to make sure that it was both a man and a woman who went together to do these door-to-door things so that it wasn't just men because most people were assuming that this law was about men and didn't have any awareness of it being about women. What they were scared of was men molesting little boys and that image was being shown all the time. Having both a man and a woman really broke into people's assumptions about what homosexuals were and what this law was about. It meant that people were having to get to know each other well and go door-to-door with each other; it really pushed a lot of us together.¹⁴⁹

Having a man and a woman both identify as part of the gay community was very important because it connected two faces to the term homosexual. For the public, this demonstrated that gays were not that scary, they were just regular people living their lives. In this instance the connection between the men and women was very important

¹⁴⁹ Ruth Mahaney, 11 March 2008.

because most of the negatives of the campaigns were directed towards men. By including women in the door-to-door activism, they reminded people that the law would affect women as well. Earlier in 1978, Anita Bryant stated in a pamphlet, “I don’t hate the homosexuals! But as a mother I must protect my children from their evil influence... They want to recruit your children and teach them the virtues of being a homosexual.”¹⁵⁰ When lesbians went door-to-door they changed the face of this claim. A lesbian looked like other women that people knew, and many of were mothers themselves. This tactic put lesbians and their identities at the center of countering anti-gay claims. This transformed lesbians because they saw their role in the gay movement not as trivial but as essential.

By making personal connections and presenting alternate views SCRAP 6 was able to secure support from a good portion of the community. The coalition even received financial support from unlikely supporters. For example, Mahaney remembered,

Straight people all over the county were being asked to and stepped up to do fundraisers of every sort... Like there was a bar on the square at Cotati – it’s still there, I think, it’s a little biker bar ... and they did a fundraiser. I remember going to it and it was these guys, who were not gay men at all, sitting around in this bar and they said, “Oh, what is this?” We gave them a little rap about Prop. 6 and they said, “Well, if they could do that to you, you know what are they going to do to us, so we’re with you.” Doing fundraisers everywhere, these little mini fundraisers that brought in \$30 – the connections that they raised across all kinds of barriers I think were huge. I think they did brilliant, brilliant organizing here, I think the most brilliant in the state that I saw was done in Sonoma County and it was led by lesbians in Sonoma County.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ As quoted in Tina Fetner, “Working Anita Bryant: The impact of Christian anti-gay Activism on Lesbian and Gay Claims,” *Social Problems* 48 (2001): 411.

¹⁵¹ Mahaney, 11 April 2008. Of course comments like these raise the question of the legitimacy of memory. Was SCRAP6 the best in the state? Was it really run by lesbians? Although these questions are valid, we must remember that the way that women remembered the past helps us trace the flow of action. Throughout their lives they have constructed a personal and communal meaning of the past. The impact of meaning on

Once again, SCRAP 6 was able to connect with a variety of people who saw that the initiative was not only about homosexuals, but rather about the freedom of minority groups from institutionalized oppression.

Although the gay community found support with some of the heterosexual majority, the threat of disclosure was still very real. Cass Smith experienced this first hand during the campaign against the initiative: “I can remember going into store to put ‘No on 6’ fliers and you know asked either politely or not so politely to leave,” she explained,

There was actually an occasion just before the election in November ‘78 when proposition 6 was going to be voted on. I, at the time, had a ’53 Chevy pick up truck...So the week before the election we had put posters all over both of the sides on my truck and drove from Healdsburg down to Petaluma on Old Redwood primarily...to put up posters, ‘No on 6’ posters. And we stopped at one point in Sebastopol...I was standing next to my truck while my friends went in to get something to eat and a woman drove up and told me that she wished it was legal for her husband and son to shoot gays but she didn’t have a weapon with her, I made some noncommittal comment and she drove off.¹⁵²

This very real threat reminded Smith that disclosing her sexual identity was risky.

However, reminders like this are exactly what fueled gay activism and the fight for equal treatment.

On November 7, 1978 voters across the state went to the polls. Gay men and lesbians across the state held their breath waiting for the results. In a landslide victory for the gay community, Proposition 6 lost by over a million votes. Due to the collaboration, mobilization, and outreach of the No On Six campaign, a legislative measure based on moral judgment lost on egalitarian principle.

experience and the construction of memory reveal the negotiation of identity that is missed in facts, numbers, and dates.

¹⁵² Cass Smith.

For lesbians in Sonoma County, the initial proposition, the campaign, and the victory altered the way they defined and articulated their identities. Barbara Bochinski said, “I just remember it woke me up that we were not secure in being gay people. There’s something in the mid-Seventies where we felt ‘We’re out, we’re out now.’ I had a short enough perspective on history to think that ‘Oh, we are out now,’ and so we wouldn’t have to go back in the closet. Then I realized, whooo, it wasn’t like that.” She went on to explain that the defeat of Prop 6 affected her personally: “It was a really, really big deal. It was so hopeful – that’s when I think I opened my heart to gay men a little more was because of Harvey Milk and all those people.”¹⁵³ Like Bochinski, Sonoma County lesbians started to understand themselves as part of both the women’s right movement and the gay rights movement. Women who had been insulated in their personal communities were forced to look at the realities of gay oppression.

Just three weeks after the victory, the gay community faced a horrible tragedy when Harvey Milk, the most prominent openly gay leader, was assassinated along with George Moscone, San Francisco’s liberal mayor. To make matter worse, the gunman was Dan White, a fellow city supervisor and former member of the police force. The bridge that the gay community had crossed in the No On Six campaign seemed to come crashing down with the fall of Milk and Moscone. Despite legislative progress, Milk’s death signified the ever-present danger of coming out. A disheartened gay community realized that the struggle for equality was not over but had only just begun.

In the aftermath of Proposition 6 and Milk’s death, the feminist community shifted as many lesbians started to focus on gay rights. Many still worked for women’s

¹⁵³ Bochinski, 9 October 2008.

rights, but their focus expanded, to include new conversations and new organizations. As lesbians shifted gears, they realized that the only way they could gain the necessary footing was to become a viable political group, a minority with the power to change the laws and ask for protection. Women and men continued to work together and formed groups such as the Sonoma County Gay Resource Network and newspapers like *We the People*. But in addition to this, Lesbians focused on lesbian-specific issues. They still saw feminism as essential to their lives and wanted to honor their woman-identified women ideologies, yet needed to connect to the larger gay rights movement. To do so, Lesbians formed coalitions that focused on both sexuality and gender but privileged gay rights.

Chapter 5. “I Bagged a Babe”-- Revealing Identity to Enact Change and Call for Acceptance

By the close of the 1970s, lesbians and gay men had overcome many obstacles, both independently and collaboratively. However, the one of the most challenging dilemmas was yet to come. In the summer of 1981 the first case of acquired immune deficiency was reported. AIDS, as it would later be known, first emerged in the gay men’s community. As the public caught wind of what was termed, Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID), fear and backlash spread throughout the country. The religious right claimed that the epidemic was a punishment from God and rumors flew about how one could ‘catch’ the disease. Although this disease was taking the lives of men across the nation, the government did very little to address the problem. This silence, combined with the public backlash and earlier threats on individual freedom, further mobilized the gay community to band together to demand acceptance. Although lesbians were still leery of working with gay men, the urgent need for action led many to put their biases aside to support what they were starting to see as their homosexual community. To do so, lesbians worked with gay men and AIDS victims, but they also retained their feminist ideologies and women-centered organizations. While their understanding of themselves and their communities shifted, lesbians publicly revealed their sexual identities in an attempt to renovate the homosexual image and to garner support and acceptance.¹⁵⁴

To enact change, lesbians worked within the framework of their previous activism in the women’s movement. They used previous connections and tactics to bring a new

¹⁵⁴ Jennifer Brier, “Locating Lesbian and Feminist Responses to AIDS, 1982-1984,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 35 (2007): 234-236.

message to the public. In Sonoma County, lesbians worked to familiarize the public with homosexual civil liberties. Soon after the outbreak of AIDS, women worked to put education programs into place in government agencies. Gayle Remick moved to the county with her partner France Fuchs in 1978, just as the feminist and lesbian community was shifting. Remick and Fuchs found a home in the fervent women's community and served as an example of an 'out and proud' couple. In the early 80s Remick ran a series of homosexual sensitivity trainings for the Sonoma County police department. Fuchs explained that her partner,

... Was a comic and because she was kind of a feisty butch who could relate to men really, really well she could get up and kind of entertain and kind of cajole them and make them see that she wasn't such a strange, freakish, different species than they. They had had some sensitivity training before but it was more – I think it wasn't as personal, I think it was trying to be more educative and there was a certain wariness, of course, between the sheriffs and these people that were coming to tell them how they should be. Whereas with Gail, she was able to do it in such a way that she got them laughing– She was a working-class woman who know how to relate to these cops, grew up with brothers, had enough of that in her that it really worked. I remember – and she used to do this in her comedy routine too, she would talk about it. She would hold up a picture of me at the sheriffs' trainings and she would say – she's pass it around and she'd say, "Look at this, I bagged a babe." That was one of her entrees into it. She'd pass around my picture and I kind of could pass as more of the fem type so they would go "Wow, really? Lesbians can look like this?" It was just a good hearty connection, and I really appreciate that she did that.¹⁵⁵

Remick appealed to heterosexual men because she was able to work with them rather than against them. Instead of telling them how they should act, she leveled with them and presented her sexual identity as something they could relate to even if they didn't agree with it. This was a paradigm shift from the earlier women-only focus of the feminist

¹⁵⁵ Frances Fuchs, interview by the author, 27 June 2008, Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, Ca.

movement, yet it still perpetuated the personal connection that defined women's activism. Like Remick, other lesbians also exposed their sexual identity in order to fight for change, and in the process re-defined themselves and their communities.

As lesbians started to conceptualize themselves not only as woman-identified women but also as gay women, they realized that in order to counter homophobia they had to politicize their gender and their sexual identity. As part of the public coming out process, the lesbian community created lesbian-specific coalitions.¹⁵⁶ In order to negotiate the two facets of their identities, lesbians focused on gay rights issues in a women-centered space. In this arena they grappled not only with what it meant to be a woman or a lesbian, but also what it meant to be gay in a homophobic society. The visibility of lesbian organizations was pertinent to the fight for equality because it countered the stereotypical image of the deviant gay man. Lesbians drew on the gains they had made through their feminist activism to personalize homosexuality and connect with the straight community. By publicly revealing their sexual identities, lesbians reconciled their past with the present and redefined their realities yet again.

Brown Bag Readers Theater was one of the first lesbian specific organizations in Sonoma County. The coalition focused on the prevalence of lesbian alcoholism and encouraged acceptance and recovery. A brochure announcing the organization stated, "For too long brown bags have been used to hide lesbian reading material and alcohol. We no longer choose to cover up **Who** and **What** we are. It is time for all of us to put our

¹⁵⁶ Lesbians and gay men also continued to work together to create combined coalitions such as the Sonoma County Lesbian and Gay Alliance and later a gay newspaper titled, *We The People*. Although these coalitions were important to the growth of a strong political faction, this section focuses on lesbian-specific activism. The coalitions that emerged combined feminist and gay rights issues to create a unique force that led to a stronger gay community.

brown bags down!”¹⁵⁷ To put their ideology into action, the collective performed very personal one act plays about their own past and the way that alcohol had affected their lives and the lives of those they loved. The goal was to enable lesbians to overcome their addictions, which were perpetuated by fear of disclosure and negative stereotypes. Nancy Morehead was involved in this organization, and she recalled that,

...It started with women and alcohol, but it became co-dependency, drug addiction, food addiction, money addiction, and we had several scripts, and at one point we had a grant for several years to perform in different venues for different counties, for their folks in rehab or in a halfway house, or something like that. Mainly, it spoke to both things. It spoke to the recovery issues, and it made it clear to straight people that it didn't really matter your sexual orientation. That we could share the same issues and the same growth and the same process. So it was consciousness-raising to get that 'L' word out there, you know. At the same time, it's even more strong in the gay and lesbian community because for so many, many years, you met each other in a bar and it wasn't safe to be out...and it's very different now...but back then, there was a lot of alcoholism.¹⁵⁸

By addressing alcoholism, Brown Bag Readers Theater publicly acknowledged the troubled past of their community. They did not try to hide their history in order to present a positive image, but rather used the past as a way to discuss the reality of the hardships homosexuals faced. The theater group sought to normalize homosexuality for lesbians while crossing boundaries to connect with the general public.

On a stage in front of gay men, lesbians, and heterosexuals, a woman confessed, “I used alcohol frequently to aid in denying that I was gay. Straight parties were particularly difficult. Couple/three bourbons made it a lot easier to dance with Steve instead of Shirley. A couple/three more made it easier to go home alone instead of with

¹⁵⁷ Brown Bag Readers Theater Pamphlet. 1980. From the personal collection of Lindee Reese, Cotati, CA.

¹⁵⁸ Morehead, 16 November 2006.

Mary.”¹⁵⁹ By revealing this difficult predicament in a public environment this woman personally acknowledged her past while also serving as a role model for others. As more and more women publicized their sexual identities, their frustrations, and their realities, lesbians entered into the spotlight and transformed the image of homosexuality. Lesbians emerged as respectable and influential individuals concerned with recovery and health. As lesbians established themselves as a viable public presence, they leveraged their position to also call for political change.

Following the rollercoaster of the defeat of the Briggs initiative and the subsequent assassination of Milk and Moscone, lesbians in Sonoma County also started to organize politically. Drawing on their activism against Proposition 6 as well as the emerging public presence of the lesbian community, a group of lesbians founded the Lesbian Voters Action Caucus (LVAC) in 1980. Nancy Moorhead, one of the founding members of LVAC, explained, “We organized this Lesbian Voters Action Caucus with a couple of different purposes. One was political and we started researching and presenting a sample ballot, you know, here’s how we would recommend that you vote this time. We did that for every election for years and years... The other wing was educational and we would organize these lecture series... For the most part, they were held at the senior center, maybe once a month, and we would decide on a topic, and get a panel or an individual speaker.”¹⁶⁰ These political, educational, and cultural tactics mirrored the tactics of the women-centered organizations, but privileged sexual identity as the unifying principle.

¹⁵⁹ Donna Canali, “Dykes Living Sober: Throwing Away The Brown Bags” *Sonoma County Lesbian and Gay Alliance News* July/August (1979) From the personal collection of Lindee Reese, Cotati, CA.

¹⁶⁰ Nancy Morehead, 16 November 2006.

LVAC served primarily as a visible public force to promote change. To do so, the collective focused on educating lesbian voters as well as educating the general public about gay rights. Cass Smith explained, “LVAC did a lot of work to get people to vote, to provide voter education, especially on issues of particular interest to the lesbian and gay communities and to really encourage lesbians in particular to get out and vote.”¹⁶¹ For each election, LVAC created a sample ballot that endorsed candidates who supported women’s and gay rights. At first they had trouble finding gay-friendly politicians, but as their organization and the visible presence of the gay community grew politicians were eager to receive their support. In addition to promoting gay-friendly politicians and encouraging lesbians to vote, LVAC also focused on promoting the gay community as an acceptable political and cultural minority. One of their tactics was to combine forces with straight leaders and hold public forums to create an alliance between the straight and gay community. For example, in 1980, the organization hosted a Lesbian Entertainment and Education Resource evening for the general public. In an invitation letter, a prominent Sonoma County lesbian, Georgia Prescott wrote, “Presently there are more than 12,500 of us (lesbians) in this county. You know us as your neighbors, grocery clerks, social workers, gas attendants, nurses, phone installers, attorneys to name only a few. We invite you through this evening to also get to know us as lesbians.”¹⁶² Her personal invitation presented lesbians as a positive force in the community. She went on to say, “As presenters of this evening we recognize our bravery to be seen as lesbians in a primarily heterosexual community. As a recipient of this letter we recognize you as a potential ally

¹⁶¹ Cass Smith.

¹⁶² Georgia Prescott, Personal Invitation, April 1, 1980. From the personal collection of Ruth Mahaney, San Francisco, CA.

in helping create greater understanding among people of different sexual and affectional preferences. We have designed this evening to share information with heterosexuals about ourselves in a fun and non-threatening way. We hope that you will join us in bridging the gap of understanding and bring a co-worker, friend, or family.”¹⁶³ This non-threatening and professional approach countered popular assumptions about both homosexuals and feminists. It is important to understand this public exposure as an act of bravery as Prescott mentioned. At this time the heterosexual public was beginning to see homosexuality in a different light, yet lesbians still risked losing respect, personal relationships, and even their livelihoods by coming out. This act of courage was the first step in bridging the gay/straight divide and building a culture of acceptance.

Years later LVAC continued this courage with a bold move to buy billboard advertisements to literally broadcast the terms ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ to the county. Moorhead explained, “We raised money once, enough money to do a billboard right at the beginning of January, I think it was probably 89’ by the time we did this, and it said ‘Sonoma County Lesbians Wish You A Gay And Joyous New Year.’ You know, it got completely wiped out. We bought two, so we could replace it and get a full month’s worth, because, you know, people weren’t happy to read that. We were just out there and wild.”¹⁶⁴ What started off in 1980 as a small organization to introduce lesbians into the world of politics grew to be an outspoken force for gay liberation by the end of the decade. Both Brown Bag Readers Theater and LVAC illustrate the shift in consciousness that took place as lesbians began to identify as both feminists and as members of a greater

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Moorhead, 16 November 2006.

gay community. In this process, they blended the factions of their identities and negotiated their political and personal positions.

LVAC empowered lesbians to become involved in the traditionally heterosexual world of politics. Since the founders of LVAC were also involved in women-centered organizations and community, they designed the meetings with feminist ideals in mind. In order to succeed they believed their meetings had to be safe woman-only spaces where all members contributed and could speak their mind. LVAC had no official hierarchy and instead relied on consensus and mutual respect. The structure of the meetings shows that, in this moment, women combined their feminist and lesbian identities to create a new understanding of themselves. The collective structured the meetings so that each member had a chance to not only voice their opinions, but also what they called their ‘paranoia’s.’”

Barbara Bochinski explained,

We started out [with] a brief check-in about where we were at so, say, if we were cranky that day people would know that we were cranky and wouldn't take it personally or if we were happy they would know where we were at. Then we had an agenda and it was done on a consensus basis, which I really liked because I felt it was more democratic. I feel that each person was listened to but we didn't like block consensus unless it was really important to us so the meetings functioned and to me, that's the key to consensus.... Then at the end of the meetings we had negatives and paranoia's first and then positives. Now the negatives were a criticism but it was said very clearly that criticism reflected the person doing the criticizing. So if said to you that I thought, say, you talked too much in the meeting and interrupted somebody then that was my perception and then you're not supposed to take that personally.... Then there would be paranoia's and we checked something out. The negatives had no response because really it didn't have to do with you. Somebody else might have loved that you went on about something because they felt informed. So you usually got feedback in both directions so I learned that it's not all about me, it's about what the other person's saying. The paranoia's were when you check out about something like 'I'm afraid that you're upset because I said such-and-such.' You would say, 'Oh, yes, I was but I got over it' or 'No, I wasn't' or 'Yes, and, you know, I'm still kind of

upset about it.’ So I would know where you were at and I wouldn't read into your behavior anything. It kind of made me feel less paranoid.¹⁶⁵

This structure drew on the feminist ideal of consensus and attempted to avoid divisive miscommunication.¹⁶⁶ This created a tight-knit community that focused on the issues at hand rather than dramatic divisions. In regards to her involvement in LVAC Bochinski recalled, “I felt really accepted. I felt that the structure they had for dealing with feelings and differences to a certain extent was really good. The feelings that come up during a meeting that you could express so I felt heard there more, not completely around the issue of racism but I did feel really a part of the group, I felt very accepted.”¹⁶⁷

Although a portion of women poured their energy into lesbian-specific organizations, many women continued their involvement in feminist organizations. In fact, feminist and lesbian organizations supported one another, and many lesbians were involved in both. By outwardly expressing sexual identity women labeled many of their actions ‘lesbian’ whereas before they may have tended to label them ‘feminist.’ Although the way they labeled action shifted, lesbians continued to work within the feminist movement. Additionally, some lesbians rejected public disclosure and continued to fully commit themselves to woman-centered organizations. Cass Smith recalled, “There were a lot of activist women in Sonoma County, and I think there always has been and there was some overlap, and there were some women that were involved with the Commission

¹⁶⁵ Bochinski, 9 October 2008.

¹⁶⁶ The feminist ideal of consensus came out of socialist feminism. The goal was to even the playing ground and move away from hierarchy. The hierarchy is thought to be a construction of patriarchy and therefore a form of oppression. See Rosemarie Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought*, 118-127.

¹⁶⁷ Bochinski. 9 October 2008.

[n the Status of Women], and some that were just in LVAC, and there were some that were in all.”¹⁶⁸ This overlap suggests that the majority of lesbians did not give up their feminist identity or abandon their work to promote gay rights. Instead they negotiated their identity and viewed both causes as symbiotic. However, the shift towards public disclosure caused some ripples in the feminist community as lesbian-specific politics and culture grew in Sonoma County.

By the end of the 1980s, the Sonoma County lesbian community was notorious. Just as women had moved to the county in the early 1970s for the women-centered community, lesbians migrated to Sonoma County in the 1980s to join the open lesbian community. Carolyn Gage, a famous lesbian playwright, moved to the county after living in the lesbian community in Portland. She recalled that Sonoma County had “an incredibly well developed women’s community. I always make jokes about it like ‘Oh, yeah, they had a lesbian chess club and a lesbian hiking club.’ I don’t know if they had those but I know they had a lesbian political organization, and they did have a lesbian hiking club. It was just a very, very well developed lesbian community, whereas a lot of places the bar was still kind of the hub of lesbian activity. That was not true in northern California at that time. In Sonoma anyway it was a lot of recovery consciousness.”¹⁶⁹ In this political and cultural lesbian community, women like Gage could find a place for themselves.

However, as women continued to privilege their ‘lesbian’ identity, they called on woman-centered organizations to address the importance of sexual identity as well but

¹⁶⁸ Cass Smith,

¹⁶⁹ Carolyn Gage, interview by the author, 29 April 2008, Sonoma County Women’s Oral History Project, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

some women were still concerned with the implications of connecting their organizations with the gay community. Gage recalled confrontations she had with the National

Women's History Project when she moved to the area. She explained,

Now at that time they were pretty damned homophobic and I had some contentious correspondence with them. They were not – they were closeting all of the famous women who were lesbians and I understood their point of view. It was, “We are having a hard time getting women’s curriculum in the schools period and if we start doing that we won't get anywhere.” My feeling was since when you look at women of achievement such a very high percentage of them are lesbian, I think it’s important for girls to know that and maybe connect the dots. Like “Hum, why is it every famous woman writer in my English lit course is a lesbian? I wonder if there’s some connection between talent, achievement and lesbianism?” And, of course, there is, so I get angry when people closet the famous lesbians as if heterosexual women could do this too. In many cases, especially in the 19th Century, they could not have. The [NWHP] said, “Well, we felt that these women were closeted in their day and that we should respect that.” Which was bullshit, I mean that’s ridiculous. It’s very true they may have gone bankrupt if they had un-closeted these women but I was a radical and at that time I didn’t care. I’m like, “Either take them out of the curriculum or teach them as lesbians.” But to pass them off as heterosexuals, which if you don't say someone’s a lesbian basically everybody assumes they're 'het', I felt that was wrong. I was very radical. I was taking a huge hit financially for being out and so I didn’t particularly give a shit about other people taking financial hits. That was partly, I think, one of the things that made me kind of controversial and unpopular. A lot of middle class lesbians kind of would be sort of lesbian among lesbians and then it was understood they kind of had to be quasi-closeted in other contexts and I was not someone who could ever respect that.¹⁷⁰

As we saw earlier, Molly MacGregor, the director of the NWHP came out as a lesbian as a student at Sonoma State College. However, she never wanted her work to be discredited by her sexual identity, so she chose to conceal her lesbianism. She feared that if the project presented a woman as a lesbian, her sexuality would be questioned and the legitimacy of women’s history would be threatened. Woman like Gage believed that sexual identity was a part of every aspect of their lives and the lives of many women in the past. In order to counter oppression and patriarchy they believed that public

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

disclosure was incredibly important. This division in thought illuminates the shift in the way different women conceptualized their identities and their experiences. In this period, lesbians like MacGregor continued to work with on woman-centered organizations, and lesbians like Gage worked for lesbian-specific cause, while other traveled between feminist and lesbian action. No matter which stance a lesbian took, the increasing focus on sexual identity altered their political and personal lives.

Lesbians exposed their sexual orientation as participants in lesbian organizations as well as in their personal lives and actions. As women re-defined themselves and publicly articulated their lesbian identity, they began to understand their social roles in a different light. As woman-identified-women, lesbians viewed themselves as activists with the goal to oppose traditional female roles. As they shifted to legitimize homosexuality both in public and in their own lives, they re-worked their definitions of traditional female roles in marriage and motherhood as lesbian roles. This was in part due to the lifecycle of these women. Whereas in the past they had prioritized the movement, as they entered into a later stage of their lives they started to think about family, lasting relationships, and lucrative careers. Moreover, as lesbians they twisted the traditional roles and called the public to examine gender and sexuality. In this moment lesbians began to define themselves as a part of society instead of in opposition to society.

While motherhood was not a new issue for feminists or lesbians, becoming a mother completely detached from a relationship with a man was a new idea. As lesbians increased their public presence a handful also started the process of building their own families. Mary Kowatch was one of the first lesbians in Sonoma County to look into having a child on her own. As a pioneer into the role of lesbian motherhood Kowatch

faced many hardships. She explained, “There just wasn’t a lot, there weren’t sperm banks or anything like that, they didn’t exist at that point and you couldn’t go to a straight OBGYN doctor and get inseminated, not that a lot of lesbians at that point wanted to but I happened to want to, which was the next thing I did.”¹⁷¹

Although Kowatch identified as a lesbian, she did not have a partner. Instead she wanted to have a child as a single woman. She had a friend who was willing to serve as a co-parent but would not hold any custody over the child. Effectively, her actions paved the way not only for lesbians but also for all women to create their own families without the presence of a man. In order to have a child, Kowatch sought out a donor to help her conceive. She explained,

I had a baby by donor insemination; I chose to use a known donor. This was in 1979; he was born in ’80. I used a known donor– I basically found a guy’s name from a friend – I called him and said, “I’m looking for a donor that I can say to my kid, “This is your father and when he gets to be a teenager maybe you can spend a little time with him but I don’t want a father, I want somebody that doesn’t want to be in the child’s life and may see him periodically when he’s older.” The guy agreed to doing that, said that’s what he wanted, didn’t want responsibility for a kid, he didn’t want any of that stuff. He didn’t want to have to pay; he didn’t want to do any of that. So I did inseminations for six months and got pregnant and had a boy child, at which point he sued for paternity in about six months.

Not anticipating any hassles, Kowatch did not sought out legal council prior to conceiving. Even if she had done so, it may not have helped since there were no laws protecting single lesbian mothers at the time. In a matter of months Kowatch’s personal decision to have a child was thrust into the public eye. She continued,

[The donor] sued and he got paternity. It was a very tangled system partly because the D.A.’s office and the judge were very clearly upset that a lesbian woman would choose to raise a child alone that was a boy child. That was

¹⁷¹ Kowatch, 14 April 2008.

really way too much for them to manage. They really thought that it was not okay that I would have a boy child on my own.

After Kowatch's donor won his case for paternity, her took her to court for partial custody of the child. The judicial battle waged on for many years as Kowatch sought to secure complete custody. The feminist community rallied around Kowatch to support her both financially and emotionally. She recalled,

I had the lesbian community doing benefits, I had all kinds of stuff to try to raise money and keep the cost down... People were really, really upset, I would take people to court with me and Jordan would win some visitation or something and they would come back angrier even than I was...it was pretty big drama in the community; it was very upsetting to a lot of people. A lot of people were very supportive and did a lot of fundraising and that kind of thing. There was an article in *Ms.* magazine about it.

To fight for complete custody, Kowatch's attorney argued that she was a capable and stable woman. She had a friend who could act as a co-parent so childcare was not an issue. Still the opposition pushed back and focused on the fact that there was no legal agreement and that the insemination did not occur at a doctors office. To Kowatch, this seemed like an excuse. She stated, "It seemed a little ludicrous to me. I felt like I could go to the bar and get pregnant and nobody would have known who the father was and nobody would have cared but because I used a turkey baster at home it just sent everybody over the edge and there weren't other lesbian mothers around." Kowatch never received complete custody and her cases failed over and over again in court. This was a strain on the lesbian community who believed that they had overcome so much, yet they believed that a woman, a lesbian, was still not receiving equal treatment in the courtroom.¹⁷²

¹⁷² Ibid.

With the support of the lesbian community, Kowatch took her case all the way to the state Supreme Court. The justices decided that she could not have complete custody because she did not go through a doctor to conceive. Although she was personally defeated, her case brought about a state law to protect lesbian mothers, a huge victory for the lesbian community. Kowatch explained, “[The case] went actually to the California Supreme Court where it made case law saying that if lesbians do donor insemination of known donors they have to use a physician in order to provide the protection of the lesbian from having the father sue for paternity.”¹⁷³ In addition this law also applied to single straight women. Although Kowatch had not set out to be the public face of the lesbian community, her case illuminated the discrimination that women faced due to their gender and their sexual identity. Sonoma County lesbian organizations as well as Kowatch’s case affected the way the general society and the gay community understood homosexuality. As lesbians negotiated the public presentation of their identity they called for equal rights on not only a public and political level, but also a personal level.

As Sonoma County lesbians redefined themselves, many entered into long-term relationships and worked to build their lives with other women. Although their relationships mirrored ones from their youth, the focus was less on the theory of women-identification and instead on commitment. Frances Fuchs and her partner Gayle Remick articulated this by holding a public ceremony to mark their commitment to one another. At this time the gay community was not fighting for the right to marriage, but rather for political rights to secure safety and protection. Fuchs remembered, “People thought it was weird but we were just really romantic and Gail was just really gutsy. I was too but she

¹⁷³ Ibid.

was just more of an extrovert. People said things to us like ‘Why are you doing this? It’s not legal. It’s a heterosexual institution, why would you want to mimic that?’” Just as women had politicized their personal lives in the feminist movement, lesbians like Fuchs and Remick understood that the way they lived their personal lives was political as well. In response to her critics Fuchs replied, “We’re in love, we’re proud of our relationship. We are totally committed to each other, we want to make it public and we don’t really care too much about the other stuff. This is something that we want to celebrate and we want our community to support us and be part of that.”¹⁷⁴ Through their commitment ceremony, they redefined what marriage meant and who could partake in the act. Although they were not legally married, their initial step encouraged both lesbians and gay men to re-think how they could publicly perform their homosexual identities.

Through public disclosure, lesbians re-shaped both the women’s movement and the gay liberation movement. Drawing on the way they formulated and articulated their identities as woman-identified-women, lesbians publicized themselves as socially concerned women deserving of equal treatment and equal rights. As lesbians shifted the way they defined and articulated their identities, the women’s movement changed as well. While lesbians continued to work for feminist causes, the new organizations and coalitions tended to focus more on gay rights. If only women-centered organization is explored historically it would seem that at this moment feminism declined. However, the study of the flow of identity formation, articulation, and negotiation, reveals that lesbians shifted their focus not because they turned their back on feminist causes, but rather as an

¹⁷⁴ Fuchs, 27 June 2008.

attempt to leverage their political and personal positions to fight for equality across the board.

Epilogue-- Re-defining Past and Present Identity Through the Oral History Process

On a warm afternoon in October 2008, over a dozen former participants of the Lesbian Voters Action Caucus gathered at the clubhouse of a Sebastopol senior center for a group interview and potluck put on by the Lesbian Archives of Sonoma County. Women brought pictures, flyers, articles, and other remnants of the past, and the archives founders created an impromptu exhibit of the ephemera on folding tables lining the walls. As a guest, I had a chance to observe this event and talk with the women about their memories. At one point, one of the women and I were looking at an entire table of donated t-shirts. As a historian, I saw a great collection of t-shirts from the women's movement in Sonoma County, including a few lesbian specific shirts. However, this woman saw something different saying, 'Oh look! We have an entire archive of lesbian t-shirts!' As soon as she said this, I realized that many of the collectives on the shirts (Women Against Rape, Moonrise Café, Take Back The Night, etc.) were run or greatly impacted by lesbians. For this woman, these t-shirts depicted her memory of the lesbian influence on the women's movement in Sonoma County. Even though in the past the t-shirts were not designed as 'lesbian t-shirts,' today this woman remembered the connection between the lesbian community and the shirts. In effect, she defined them according to her present memory and her present identity. This moment illustrates how the oral history process, and the subsequent efforts to document the history of a community, inspires participants to re-define both their past and present identity.

For the women interviewed for this thesis, the redefinition of the past and the present can be seen in two different instances: first, in the interview itself and second, in the process of documenting the past through the Lesbian Archives. As part of the

interview, participants were asked to explain their personal memory and explain why they made certain decisions or joined coalitions. In this process they had a chance to view themselves as historical actors and therefore put their lives into the context of history. Many people understand history to be something that occurs around them, but not as something that they are personally involved in. Therefore, the oral history interview allows participants to re-imagine themselves as historical actors.

Throughout the interviews, women usually began by explaining that they did not recall that much about the past or that they were not that involved. However as the interview went on, they started to remember more and more, and they realized that they remembered more than they initially thought. In addition, they also made statements about how certain moments impacted the course of their lives. For example, while describing the Penngrove Women's Center, Mary Kowatch said, "It was a place to hang out and just be with women. It was the first time I had ever seen anything like that. I had never danced with women, been to a women's bar, I had never done any of that when I came up here so it was quite exciting to be able to have that experience and just meet people and hang out and talk and dance and play."¹⁷⁵ As memories came flooding back, interview participants also had some personal insights about their past and their involvement in the movement. In recalling her involvement in the creation of the Women's Newspaper, *Runes*, Robin Gayle said, "I really...do feel we had a lot of influence on that... on the emerging women's and lesbian culture that was happening at that time."¹⁷⁶ Over and over again women re-envisioned their personal impact on the movement as well as the impact the movement had on their lives. The process of the

¹⁷⁵ Kowatch, 14 April 2008.

¹⁷⁶ Gail, 18 April 2008.

interview allowed women to define their past, and for many this had an impact on their lives in the present.

Some articulated this identity by joining forces with the Lesbian Archives of Sonoma County. After I interviewed Frances Fuchs, she contacted the archives and donated her t-shirt collection, letters, pamphlets, and even the figurine from her wedding cake. The Lesbian Archives also invited some of the women I interviewed to their group interviews. By attending the interviews, I connected with women and conducted personal interviews with them later on. Finally, the archives founders continued to hold meetings to discuss how to document their past, and through this process they have started to build community once again. This time instead of forming coalitions to change the political and social structure of the present, they are doing so to re-claim their communal past.

In February 2009, the archives held a *Music and Memories* reunion in Cotati, California to remember the contributions of lesbians involved in Sonoma County between 1965 and 1990. The event was open to all participants and anyone interested, including men. Over 200 women showed up, and for four hours they reminisced about what it meant to be a lesbian at the time and how their actions shaped activism, culture, and the present. As women reminisced, they also discussed the current state of gay rights, the decline of interest in feminism from the next generation of women, and what they were going to do about the two. They sang, danced, and they shared memories. Former members of Brown Bag Readers Theater, who had re-connected at one of the group interviews, performed for the first time in ten years. The event was a celebration of shared identity, of a shared history.

As part of the event, the archives prepared a gallery exhibit and a timeline that lined the walls. The Lesbian Archives provided post-it notes for attendees to add their own memories to the timeline. This reflected the initial timeline presented at the reception put on by the Sonoma County Women's Oral History Project two years earlier. Interestingly, this earlier timeline was the impetus for the Lesbian Archives of Sonoma County, yet they drew on the idea in order to create a more complete narrative of the past. This represents the impact of oral history beyond the interview itself. By inviting historical actors into the process of understanding the past, oral history inspires community members to re-evaluate and re-envision and document their own lives.

Although the oral history process is sometimes complicated and chaotic, it leads to a better understanding of history both in academia and in the community. In addition, it encourages participants to join together and explore the meaning of their personal and communal histories, thus inspiring community and action. Marylou Hadditt, a founding member of the archives, explained, "I'm incredibly energized by [the archives], I mean I'm going to be eighty years old next month, and it's just giving me something that I really want to do, and that I feel is really really important to be around to do, and that is just a great feeling at my age."¹⁷⁷ By exploring not only the interviews themselves, but also the impact of the interview process on individuals and the community, historians can begin to see how memory depicts the underlying meaning of experience.

Historical analysis often overlooks the present conceptions of the past in an effort to document the 'true narrative', filtered from ideology. However, if the memory of the past and not only the events of the past are taken into consideration, a picture emerges

¹⁷⁷ Marylou Hadditt, 7 April 2008.

that portrays identity not as a given or as static, but as continually changing. The oral history process therefore provides historians with insight into the layers of identity formation, articulation, and negotiation that reveal the nuances of why and how activism happens on both a personal and political level.

This thesis began where master narratives of the contemporary women's movement in the United States leave off and ends where narratives of the gay rights movement pick up. Throughout, it has shed light on the important role lesbians played in both the women's movement and the formation of a politicized gay rights community. More importantly, it has shown the impact that personal conceptions and presentations of self have on experience. Although the focus of this thesis is sexual identity, this is true for other forms of identity as well. Therefore, the concept of identity moments could be used to illuminate the way individuals formulate, articulate, and navigate a multitude of identities across time and space. In effect, I have combined historical narrative with feminist and lesbian standpoint theory to demonstrate a way to ground the post-structural concept of identity fluctuation in time, space, and place in order to reveal the meaning that drives experience and action.

This thesis is just a stepping stone, a starting point for historical inquiry both in Sonoma County and beyond. I encourage both participant and historians in Sonoma County to continue to delve into women's and lesbian activism in the community. There are so many more identities to be explored, not to mention additional places where multiple identities cross one another. My analysis is not the culmination of the history of feminism or lesbianism in Sonoma County. I hope that other scholars challenge my work and continue to complicate the story. In a discussion on identity, theorist Juana Maria

Rodriguez asserts, "...breaking down of categories, questioning definitions and giving them new meaning, moving through spaces of understanding and dissension, working through the critical practice of 'refusing explication' is precisely what queerness entails."¹⁷⁸ This too is what historical inquiry into social movements, particularly queer social movements, should entail.

Over the past two years, a handful of oral history projects focusing on second wave feminist activists and communities have sprung up in both urban and non-urban areas in the United States.¹⁷⁹ Our historical understanding would benefit greatly from a comparison of both the interviews recorded and the oral history projects across the nation. I suggest that newly founded and future projects not only focus on the specifics of action (the who, what, when, and where) but also explore the meaning driving the action (the why). In addition, oral history has a tendency to take on the issues of the period in question as individuals relive and redefine their past through the interview process. Instead of merely seeing this as a projection of the past on the present historians should question if their projects are truly representing the past or merely perpetuating divides and misunderstanding. Therefore, I recommend that historians continually scrutinize their assumptions and findings and rely on personal narrative and their own analysis of primary documents rather than the existing national narratives to define the past. As we delve into this influential period that impacted our societal conceptions of gender,

¹⁷⁸ Rodriques. 24.

¹⁷⁹ In 2008 the National Organization of Women launched a nation-wide oral history project, Johanna Ettin, "Now Begins 40th Anniversary Oral History Project," National Organization of Women, <http://www.now.org/nnt/fall-2006/oralhistoryproject.html> (accessed 31 May 2009), Chicago also started an Oral History project. "Documenting the Women's Movement in Chicago, 1960s-1980s," Chicago Area Women's History Council, <http://www.cawhc.org/> (accessed 31 May 2009).

sexuality, race, and class, we must remember that just as the personal was political in the past, today the personal is historical; thus, history must account for the construction of identity and memory.