

“In Search of Community”: Debate and Solidarity in Victoria’s Lesbian Feminist Newsletter

*LesbiaNews*, 1989–1996

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A Graduating Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements in the

Honours Programme.

For the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts

In the

Department

of

History

University of Victoria April 1, 2026

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## Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my wonderful supervisor, Dr. Georgia Sitara. Even from the beginning, when I asked for support without having a vision for this project whatsoever, you were open and willing to help. I genuinely did a happy dance in my kitchen when I received the email that you were on board to be my supervisor for this thesis. Thank you for indispensable guidance, check-ins, validation in the merits of my work, feedback, patience, and kindness. You have helped me learn how to lead with self-compassion, even when I cried in your office. I am so grateful to learn from your mentorship. Thank you.

Thank you to my invaluable and most lovely girlfriend, Linnea. Without them, I doubt this project would be what it is now. Thank you for always listening to all my confused, excited ramblings, body doubling through late-night work sessions, calming my anxieties, cooking dinner so I could get an extra thirty minutes of research in, and for motivating me when I simply wanted to give up. I love you.

Thank you to my supportive family and friends. Thank you to my parents for encouraging me to pursue this Honours thesis and to my sister for celebrating every win alongside me despite the distance. Thank you to my friend Liz, who brought me meals or snacks while I was working. Thank you to my friends Mern, Syd, and Carys for understanding when I had to stay in and work on my thesis instead of going out. Thank you to my friends, coffee, peppermint tea, my study music playlist, and the fireplace channel. ;)

Thank you to the ɫəkʷəŋən people, including the Songhees and Esquimalt, and WSÁNEĆ people, whose lands are where I wrote this thesis. I am especially grateful as a settler and uninvited guest on these unceded territories. I moved here to attend the University of Victoria five years ago from the lands of the Anishinaabeg people, which include the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Pottawatomi Nations, collectively known as the Confederacy of the Three Fires. I immensely recognize and respect the stewards of Turtle Island since time immemorial. I also recognize my position of privilege and the right of Indigenous Peoples to refuse my allyship in the process of Indigenous resurgence and decolonization.

Thank you to the many lesbians of Victoria who made *LesbiaNews* come to life. It is such an honour to read your thoughts and to add to your legacy. You are the complete and total genesis for this project. I hope I do justice to your words and lives.

Finally, thank you to me. This thesis has been one of the most challenging projects I have ever completed. It helped me learn new things about myself and the world around me. Even for all the stress and anxiety it created, I am proud to have done it.

## Introduction

In September of 1989, a lesbian-feminist newsletter titled *LesbiaNews* was launched in Victoria, B.C. The newsletter was volunteer-run and produced to “provide a supportive forum for Victoria lesbians.”<sup>1</sup> *LesbiaNews* originated after two previous attempts to create a longstanding lesbian newsletter in Victoria, titled *WAVES*<sup>2</sup> and *FLAGRANT*,<sup>3</sup> had failed as a result of financial difficulties. The creator and first editor, Debby Gregory (who later went by the name Debby Yaffe), had the resources to launch *LesbiaNews* as the “half-owner of a personal computer.”<sup>4</sup> The newsletter maintained a longstanding presence as it evolved over the years. It was renamed *LNews* as “BC’s Premiere Lesbian Magazine” in 1997,<sup>5</sup> the *Lavender Rhinoceros*, which expanded its audience to include gay men in 1999,<sup>6</sup> and *OutViews* in 2002.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I have confined the scope of research from 1989 to 1996. *LesbiaNews*’s grassroots approach changed in 1997 when the newsletter transitioned to a province-wide focus as a profitable “salary-paying magazine.”<sup>8</sup>

This thesis originated because of a personal curiosity about how the lesbian community in Victoria saw and organized itself. Did *LesbiaNews* reflect wider cultural, political, and social debates of the late 1980s and 1990s in Canada and the wider world? Or was its content specific to Victoria? Did the newsletter create a community, or was it the outcome of one? Was debate and internal dissent encouraged or discouraged? Did the newsletter impact women’s liberation

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<sup>1</sup>“LesbiaNews,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1989, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Reva Hutkin, “Waltzing Down Memory Lane With Reva,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1990, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Reva Hutkin, “Waltzing Down Memory Lane With Reva Continued From Last Month,” *LesbiaNews*, April 1990, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Debby Gregory (Yaffe), “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1989, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara McLaughlin, “LNews,” *LNews*, February 1997, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Lavender Rhinoceros: Victoria’s Premiere Lesbian & Gay Magazine.*, 1999.

<http://gdc.galegroup.com/gdc/artemis/atp/AboutThisPublicationPortletWin?mCode=6QMC&p=AHSI&prodId=AHSL&action=e&windowstate=normal&mode=view&userGroupName=uvictoria>.

<sup>7</sup> *OutViews*, (Victoria, B.C: Bleeding Rose Multimedia), 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Freeman, “‘A Public Sense of Ourselves:’ Communication and Community-Building in Canada’s *LesbiaNews/LNews*, 1989–98,” *Westminster Papers in Communication & Culture* 8, no. 3 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.138>.

and/or gay rights activism? And most of all, what did lesbian community mean to *LesbiaNews* readers and contributors, and how did they try to achieve it? While I initially thought these questions might require intense investigative digging, the contributors of the newsletter were just as interested in understanding community as I was. In fact, there seemed to be a deep devotion to defining and maintaining an internal sense of community. Of all the recurring topics from 1989 to 1996, the idea of community appeared most consistently. Editors and contributors asked one another how they defined community, if it was necessary, and who should be included. To address these guiding questions, the first chapter outlines the existing historiography of the Canadian feminist print literature movement, various theorizations of community, as well as the history of lesbian-feminism and the sex wars through the analyses of key scholars.

The second chapter focuses on my primary research of all available *LesbiaNews* publications from 1989 to 1996. All 75 issues consulted for this research are accessible through the University of Victoria's Special Collections. The research draws on numerous letters to the editors, written or artistic contributions from the readers, the editorials featured on the second page of every issue, and occasionally other materials such as advertisements. The letters to the editor section was a forum for discussion between the editors and readers but also between readers who wrote to one another over the course of months. This section was simply referred to as "letters" or the "Thirteenth Opinion"<sup>9</sup> when it was later renamed.

In terms of process and methodology, I spent late September to mid-November reading an average of four issues of *LesbiaNews* per day. Each issue ranged from twelve to twenty pages and took approximately thirty minutes to an hour to read, as I took notes on each page. While reviewing the newsletter, I focused specifically on content that helped answer my proposed research questions. It should be noted that the pieces selected for analysis in this thesis do not

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<sup>9</sup> "Thirteenth Opinion," *LesbiaNews*, October 1994, 14.

necessarily include one article from each issue. Instead, I selected excerpts that reflected recurring themes related to the formation and understanding of community, feminist politics in relation to sexuality, and Victoria-specific contexts. These themes appeared most prominently throughout the newsletter and aligned directly with my research questions.

Given the vast number of contributions to *LesbiaNews*, there were many topics I was unable to include in this thesis. These included gardening, health and therapy, aging, AIDS, religion, family and children, cats, environmental activism, sports, war and the military, and astrology. Although I could not foreground these subjects here, I hope that future researchers will continue the analysis of *LesbiaNews* and explore these additional themes.

## **Chapter One: Historiography**

In her extensively researched work, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love between Women*,<sup>10</sup> Leila Rupp demonstrated that even in the earliest societies, the possibility of love between women was known, even as it was feared, ignored, or denied. She began the book by exploring the nuanced range of labels and behaviours that have been applied to women who love women across time and space. Rupp noted that most of the historical evidence about women's desire for one another comes from men,<sup>11</sup> but then asked a more important question: "What about their own conceptions, their own understandings of who they are?"<sup>12</sup> Here, Rupp argued that self-representations are invaluable to an accurate understanding of history. This thesis similarly turns to historical subjects themselves for guidance. Nearly all contributors to *LesbiaNews* self-identified as lesbians, feminists, or lesbian-feminists, framing themselves as part of a

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<sup>10</sup> Leila J. Rupp, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love between Women*, 1st ed. Vol. 15 (New York: NYU Press, 2009). <https://doi.org/10.18574/9780814777459>.

<sup>11</sup> Rupp, *Sapphistries*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Rupp, *Sapphistries*, 7.

community. As I work to expand my historical empathy and represent historical subjects as they represent themselves, I therefore use these self-descriptions to guide the relevant historiography.

### **The Canadian Feminist Print Literature Movement**

To begin, *LesbiaNews* is situated within and representative of the Canadian feminist print literature movement. The movement began in the 1960s and continued into the 1990s, inspired by second-wave feminist principles in order to challenge the male-dominated publishing industry. In her 1989 book on feminist literature, Rita Felski stated that feminist political discourse was “linked to the political interests and struggles of an oppositional community.”<sup>13</sup> Felski argued that feminists chose to position themselves outside of the male hegemonic discourse to oppose it politically. Felski’s framing is useful for understanding feminist newsletters not only as media products, but as political tools created for and by a feminist readership.

Six years later, Barbara Marshall’s 1995 article, “Communication as Politics: Feminist Print Media in English Canada,”<sup>14</sup> added valuable insights within a Canadian context. Marshall argued that alternative print media, which encompassed feminist newsletters like *LesbiaNews*, played a “central role in carving out new spaces for expression, identity formation, and political engagement.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Marshall contended similarly to Felski that the construction of alternative feminist media acted as an oppositional public sphere which not only opened a forum for political claims to be shaped, but generated diversity and encouraged experimentation with identity. Furthermore, she noted that due to its fundamentally political origins, the feminist print

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<sup>13</sup> Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 46. <https://archive.org/details/beyondfeministae0000fels/page/n15/mode/2up>

<sup>14</sup> Barbara L. Marshall, “Communication as Politics: Feminist Print Media in English Canada,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 18, no. 4 (1995). <https://doi.org/10.18574/9781479808557>.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall, “Communication as Politics,” 465.

literature movement was inseparable from feminist awareness and activism. The movement was thus committed toward influencing broader public discourse by circulating feminist critiques of society.<sup>16</sup> This meant that feminists worked to influence a wider audience by sharing their ideas on how they thought society could be changed.

The feminist movement balanced external political motivation in tandem with creating internal solidarity among women.<sup>17</sup> Marshall described this dynamic as a “tension between particularity and universality.”<sup>18</sup> *LesbiaNews* demonstrated this tension in its calls for feminist activism and theorizing throughout its publication. For example, contributors urged readers to attend workshops that could reduce the risk of harassment against women through self-defence.<sup>19</sup> This example demonstrated internal solidarity in its affirmation of the higher rates of harassment against women and advocated for external political change by acting in opposition to wider societal issues. The newsletter contributed to the political positioning of feminist print media as an alternative public sphere through an external opposition to male hegemony, while also internally defining solidarities among feminists.

A key distinction that scholar Kate Adams argued was that, across Canada, the U.S., and Britain, lesbian women were at the forefront of shaping alternative feminist politics through the dissemination of their ideas in feminist media.<sup>20</sup> Adams demonstrated that lesbians influenced alternative publications to resist institutionalized white and heterosexual feminism or “mainstreaming” as a feminist organizing strategy.<sup>21</sup> The role of lesbians also influenced the movement’s underlying belief that by hearing more diverse opinions about feminism, all women

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<sup>16</sup> Marshall, “Communication as Politics,” 464.

<sup>17</sup> Marshall, “Communication as Politics,” 465.

<sup>18</sup> Marshall, “Communication as Politics,” 464.

<sup>19</sup> “Resources to Oppose Harassment,” *LesbiaNews*, December 1992/ January 1993, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Kate Adams, “Built Out of Books: Lesbian Energy and Feminist Ideology in Alternative Publishing,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 34, no. 3-4 (1998): 116. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v34n03\\_07](https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v34n03_07).

<sup>21</sup> Marshall, “Communication as Politics,” 466.

would come to understand and resist their oppression.<sup>22</sup> Adams' contributions enrich the historical understanding of the Canadian feminist print literature movement because she centered the influence and significance of lesbians.

However, the influence of lesbians was not always acknowledged by their heterosexual feminist counterparts. Historian Joan Sangster stated, "if feminists at the time [of second wave feminism in Canada] were self-critical, it might be of their inattention to lesbian history, with heterosexual privilege left unchallenged."<sup>23</sup> Sangster argued that continued ignorance of lesbian history by white heterosexual feminists could enshrine heteronormativity and fail to address racism and classism.<sup>24</sup> Sangster's critique reinforces Adams's and Marshall's emphasis on the importance of recognizing lesbian contributions to feminist organizing and literature.

In 2002, Barbara Godard built on the Canadian contextualization through her article, "Feminist Periodicals and the Production of Cultural Value: The Canadian Context."<sup>25</sup> More than 300 feminist periodicals have been established across Canada since the 1960s, encompassing a range of print media that included newspapers, periodicals, newsletters, and magazines.<sup>26</sup> Godard noted a distinct lack of political support and governmental funding for women and feminist endeavours from the 1980s to the early 1990s. Particularly when Canada had a Conservative federal government between 1983 and 1993, there was a "marked reduction in state support for culture and for women's socio-economic empowerment."<sup>27</sup> In fact, Godard noted that the sphere of feminist organizing and discourse had begun to shrink as early as 1990. Despite this political climate, *LesbianNews* continued the tradition of Canadian feminist print media well into the

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<sup>22</sup> Adams, "Built Out of Books," 120.

<sup>23</sup> Joan Sangster, "Creating Popular Histories: Re-Interpreting 'Second Wave' Canadian Feminism," *Dialectical Anthropology* 39, no. 4 (2015): 400. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43895166>.

<sup>24</sup> Sangster, "Creating Popular Histories," 399.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Godard, "Feminist Periodicals and the Production of Cultural Value: The Canadian Context," *Women's Studies International Forum* 25, no. 2 (2002). [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395\(02\)00231-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(02)00231-5).

<sup>26</sup> Godard, "Feminist Periodicals and the Production of Cultural Value," 212.

<sup>27</sup> Godard, "Feminist Periodicals and the Production of Cultural Value," 210.

1990s. Economically, *LesbiaNews* operated as a grassroots newsletter that was relatively small, volunteer-produced, and funded through subscriptions and local advertisers.<sup>28</sup> As Godard explained, “undertaking the work of producing a periodical in order to contest the very assumptions of what constitutes ‘politics’ and ‘culture,’ feminists bring with them no accumulation of capital, either economic or symbolic, which might be reconverted into support for their cultural productions.”<sup>29</sup> *LesbiaNews* similarly reflected feminist print media as a labour of love and of organizing around community needs. The grassroots-based approach likely contributed to the newsletter’s longevity despite the conservative political climate.<sup>30</sup> Godard’s work thus provides important insights into the political and economic Canadian context.

Building on Marshall, Adams, and Godard, I argue that *LesbiaNews* writers and readers were aware of and part of the Canadian feminist print literature movement. Through this awareness, they produced their own writings in the newsletter and shared other lesbian-centered feminist works. Those who read and wrote to *LesbiaNews* were reading, viewing, and engaging with important feminist scholars and thinkers of the 20th century. By the 1990s, contributors demonstrated familiarity with the growing amount of books and films released about lesbians and feminists. As evidenced by their engagement with these materials, lesbian-feminists in Victoria saw themselves as part of a visible lesbian community and intellectual tradition. Contributors reviewed and debated works by writers such as Joan Nestle,<sup>31</sup> as well as films like *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*,<sup>32</sup> demonstrating the newsletter’s engagement with both American and Canadian lesbian cultural productions. The contributors and

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<sup>28</sup> Debby Yaffe, “Waves of the Future,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1990, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Godard, “Feminist Periodicals and the Production of Cultural Value,” 211.

<sup>30</sup> Becki Ross, “Tracking Lesbian Speech: The Social Organization of Lesbian Periodical Publishing in Canada, 1973-1988,” in *Women’s Writing and the Literary Institution*, ed. Claudine Potvin and Janice Williamson (Edmonton, AB: Research Institute for Comparative Literature, 1992): 175.

<sup>31</sup> Jahnet Hewsick, “These Are a Few of My Favourite Zings,” *LesbiaNews*, November 1992, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Liz Van Berkle, “Reviews,” *LesbiaNews*, December 1992/January 1993, 5.

readers of *LesbiaNews* were not only a part of the Canadian feminist print literature movement, but they also cultivated their position within it. They engaged directly by creating their own newsletter to be in conversation with notable feminists and lesbian thinkers. The contributions that encompass *LesbiaNews* therefore demonstrate the role of lesbians within the movement, their contributions to and engagement with an oppositional feminist sphere, and the labour of love that simultaneously built the feminist movement and lesbian identities.

The intersection of Canadian feminist print media, community, and lesbian-feminism has been best analyzed by scholar Barbara Freeman. Freeman's 2017 article "'A Public Sense of Ourselves': Communication and Community-Building in Canada's *LesbiaNews/LNews*, 1989–98," stands as the only substantive research about the Victoria-based newsletter to date.<sup>33</sup> Freeman identified *LesbiaNews* as the only specifically lesbian, English-Canadian periodical in the 1980s–1990s to have lasted long enough to make detailed analysis possible.<sup>34</sup> Freeman categorized the newsletter into three distinct stages: *LesbiaNews* (1989–1991) as a lesbian-feminist newsletter edited by Debby Yaffe, *LesbiaNews* (1991–1995) as a lesbian diversity newsletter edited by Joan Garcia and Karey Perks, and *LNews* (1995–1998) as a lesbian magazine edited by Barbara McLauchlin. Freeman's work focused on the shifting editorial perspectives through oral interviews and used contributions from non-editors only supplementally.<sup>35</sup> However, Freeman's focus on editors importantly foregrounded their perspectives, but left less room for sustained analysis of non-editor contributions. Because the editors were responsible for maintaining the newsletter's "mandate,"<sup>36</sup> their contributions often

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<sup>33</sup> Barbara Freeman, "'A Public Sense of Ourselves': Communication and Community-Building in Canada's *LesbiaNews/LNews*, 1989–98," *Westminster Papers in Communication & Culture* 8, no. 3 (2017): 143-167. <https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.138>.

<sup>34</sup> Freeman, "'A Public Sense of Ourselves,'" 146.

<sup>35</sup> Freeman, "'A Public Sense of Ourselves,'" 143.

<sup>36</sup> Freeman, "'A Public Sense of Ourselves,'" 153.

reflected concerns that differed from those of other writers. Analysis of debates and contributions from non-editors represent a wider range of perspectives and valuable context of the *LesbiaNews* community. To supplement Freeman's research, this thesis balances editor-written material with letters to the editor, letters in *LesbiaNews* directed at other readers, and contributor-written articles.

Freeman also stated that the newsletter was vital for communication in the Victoria lesbian community.<sup>37</sup> However, Freeman argued that the newsletter's role as a forum for communication faded as "the concept of community became increasingly fragmented and elusive [before *LNews*], reflecting a readership that was rapidly becoming disengaged from lesbian-feminism and losing the pillars of its social support system as well."<sup>38</sup> Freeman's analysis therefore contended that debates in *LesbiaNews* about lesbian-feminism and the sex wars represent a "heated and divided" feminist culture of the 1990s.<sup>39</sup> My findings suggest that there were only a few cases of complete disengagement, such as a letter from an unnamed contributor who threatened to cancel her subscription because she disagreed with a previous submission.<sup>40</sup> This thesis will show that Victoria's lesbian community understood that complete cohesion was not necessary to foster a sense of belonging.

## **Lesbian-Feminism and Community**

Separate from identifying as a lesbian and/or a feminist, lesbian-feminism emerged as a strand of second-wave feminism that encouraged women-centered relationships and political resistance to heteropatriarchy. Lesbian-feminism is closely related to overlapping movements

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<sup>37</sup> Freeman, "A Public Sense of Ourselves," 158.

<sup>38</sup> Freeman, "A Public Sense of Ourselves," 146.

<sup>39</sup> Freeman, "A Public Sense of Ourselves," 150.

<sup>40</sup> "Letters," *LesbiaNews*, March 1991, 2.

such as political lesbianism, radical lesbianism, and lesbian separatism. Ti-Grace Atkinson's in/famous quote from the 1970s resonates as an apt, yet divisive, descriptor of political lesbian-feminism; "feminism is the theory and lesbianism is the practice."<sup>41</sup> Atkinson's quote asserted that lesbianism is a political and feminist choice available to all women to oppose patriarchy. Another major academic theorist of lesbian-feminism, Adrienne Rich, theorized in her popular 1980 essay that "compulsory heterosexuality" was the eroticization of the subordination of women.<sup>42</sup> Rich argued that heterosexuality was a political institution and was not natural or inevitable. Her concept of the "lesbian continuum," which encompassed a wide range of women's bonding behaviours, has since generated much debate in historical and contemporary circles.<sup>43</sup> She further argued that lesbian existence was "potentially liberating for all women"<sup>44</sup> and thus conceptualized lesbianism as accessible to all women as a resistance to patriarchy.

However, Black and working-class feminists emphasize the white lesbian-feminist community's racial and class exclusions. The Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist and lesbian collective, asserted in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* that "we reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly Black men, women, and children."<sup>45</sup> The Combahee River Collective identified the limitations of lesbian

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<sup>41</sup> Anne Koedt, "Lesbianism and Feminism," *The CWLU Herstory Website – Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150429104333/http://www.uic.edu/orgs/cwluherstory/CWLUArchive/lesbianfeminism.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Adrienne Cecile Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 11-48. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2003.0079>.

<sup>43</sup> Adrienne Cecile Rich, "Reflections on 'Compulsory Heterosexuality,'" *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 1 (2004): 9-11. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2004.0033>.

<sup>44</sup> Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," 36.

<sup>45</sup> Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *This Bridge Called My Back, Fortieth Anniversary Edition: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2021), 214. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18252715.35>.

separatism as a branch within radical/lesbian-feminism since it required the complete withdrawal from men in all facets of lesbian life. Lesbians of colour experienced racial oppression as well as homophobia and sexism, and therefore, could not abandon the need for comprehensive and inclusive liberation. This critique shaped later theoretical interventions that challenged feminism's tendency to treat gender oppression in isolation. Informed by the Combahee River Collective, scholars like bell hooks have strongly argued that white feminism models ignore interlocking systems of oppression like imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy.<sup>46</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw later coined the term "intersectionality" to describe how Black women experience systems of discrimination that overlap and compound, which cannot be reduced to a single-axis framework.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, Audre Lorde also centered her experiences as a Black lesbian-feminist in *This Bridge Called My Back*.<sup>48</sup> She contended that sisterhood in feminist and lesbian spaces cannot be fully recognized without acknowledging white supremacy. In an open letter to radical lesbian-feminist Mary Daly, Audre Lorde disappointedly stated, "I had hoped the lesbian consciousness of having been 'other' would make it easier to recognize the differences that exist in the history and struggle of Black women and white women."<sup>49</sup> Lorde argued here that without addressing classism and racism in lesbian-feminism, lesbian working-class women and women of colour were pushed to the margins. Alongside many other Black and working-class feminists, Lorde and the Combahee River Collective argued that lesbian-feminism should be more

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<sup>46</sup> bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, 2nd ed. (1981; reis., Taylor and Francis, an imprint of Routledge, 2014).

<sup>47</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," in *Feminism And Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198782063.003.0016>.

<sup>48</sup> Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," in *This Bridge Called My Back, Fortieth Anniversary Edition: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: State University of New York Press, 2021), 90. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18252715.35>.

<sup>49</sup> Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," 93.

cognizant of interlocking systems of oppression. This contention is relevant to *LesbiaNews* since some contributors echoed radical and/or separatist lesbian-feminist politics. For example, some contributors obscured intersectional oppressions when they argued that heteropatriarchy was the single most oppressive force in society across history.<sup>50</sup>

Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis's work, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, added to the recognition of the diverse history of lesbian communities. In 1993, the book became the first comprehensive oral history of a working-class lesbian community.<sup>51</sup> Their research drew upon years of interviewing white, Black, and Indigenous lesbians who lived in Buffalo, New York, from the 1930s to the 1960s.<sup>52</sup> *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* added to the analyses from Black feminists by bringing intersectional attention to lesbians across class differences. Kennedy and Davis argued that "affluent lesbians and gays, and recently [in the 1980s], many lesbian-feminists, have stereotyped members of this community [of working-class lesbians] as low-life societal discards and pathetic imitators of heterosexuality and therefore hardly self-conscious actors in history."<sup>53</sup> Kennedy and Davis's research instead argued that working-class lesbians, such as those in Buffalo, were key participants in the growth of lesbian consciousness, identity, pride, and community.<sup>54</sup> The narrators that Kennedy and Davis interviewed described creating community that was fostered through friendship networks,<sup>55</sup> bars, or private house parties.<sup>56</sup> Kennedy and Davis argued that lesbians before the 1960s had equally important communities and networks as

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<sup>50</sup> Sara Joy David, "From Bondage to Bonding," *LesbiaNews*, January 1990, 6.

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

<sup>52</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 135.

<sup>56</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 114.

those after the 1970s which received more political credit.<sup>57</sup> Narrators were additionally “fully aware of how powerful their visibility was, challenging gay oppression and thereby creating a better world for lesbians today.”<sup>58</sup> This quote shows that narrators understood their refusal to hide their sexuality, especially as butch and fem, functioned as a political act. Kennedy and Davis asserted that the visibility of working-class lesbians in the 1930s–1960s, which opposed heteronormative expectations, led to the formation of networks, and communities which contributed to the later shared sense of lesbian identity and formal politics.

Despite such histories of working-class lesbian community-building, late twentieth-century lesbian politics often continued to be shaped by white, upper/middle-class commentators and frameworks. The resulting social and class context of the 1990s also informed what Steven Epstein explained as the quasi-ethnic communal identity formation model in “Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity: The Limits of Social Constructionism.”<sup>59</sup> He stated, “As many observers have noted, gays [and lesbians] in the 1970s increasingly came to conceptualize themselves as a legitimate minority group, having a certain quasi-‘ethnic’ status, and deserving the same protections against discrimination that are claimed by other groups in our society.”<sup>60</sup> Epstein contended that the quasi-ethnic model served as a legitimation strategy to gain recognition from the state. He argued that the model often relied on a biological essentialist view, as opposed to a social constructionist view, which theorized gayness as an innate trait. Building from Foucault’s work on sexual identity formation, Epstein argued that sexual identity increasingly became the basis for political community.<sup>61</sup> He carefully critiqued the crystallization of gays and lesbians as a distinct social or cultural group because he argued that it could limit

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<sup>57</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 2.

<sup>58</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 184.

<sup>59</sup> Steven Epstein, “Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity: The Limits of Social Constructionism,” in *Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Reader*, eds. Peter M. Nardi and Beth E. Schneider (London: Routledge, 1998), 134.

<sup>60</sup> Epstein, “Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity,” 135.

<sup>61</sup> Epstein, “Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity,” 36.

liberation movements within an imposed category.<sup>62</sup> Sociologist Gary Kinsman extended this critique and remarked that the quasi-ethnic rights strategies can obscure distinct histories and cultural frameworks of marginalized groups.<sup>63</sup> In the pages of *LesbianNews*, contributors’ sometimes invoked a quasi-ethnic model of community, to strategically draw inspiration from established ethnic and religious networks of care. The legitimation strategy was applied by Debby Yaffe in her proposal of a Lesbian Benevolent Society that would emulate the Chinese and Jewish communities of Victoria. She stated, “These individuals [of Chinese or Jewish communities] don’t necessarily have anything more in common than we do. They just cooperate to achieve specific common goals.”<sup>64</sup> This comparison reflects an attempt to frame lesbian organizing as a legitimate form of community infrastructure. It shows how the quasi-ethnic model was applied in the hopes of replicating successes of historical, cultural, linguistic, religious, or familial connections of other marginalized groups in Victoria to gain legal rights.

Efforts to gain recognition and visibility from the state or heterosexual society have greatly informed the conceptualization of lesbian and lesbian-feminist communities. Scholar Dan Brouwer defined “visibility politics” as the theory and practice that assumes “that ‘being seen’ and ‘being heard’ are beneficial and often crucial for individuals or a group to gain greater social, political, cultural, or economic legitimacy, power, authority, or access to resources.”<sup>65</sup>

Visibility as a political strategy has been theorized as a precondition for those who are marginalized to achieve equal rights by first raising awareness of their disadvantaged situation.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Epstein, “Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity,” 139.

<sup>63</sup> Gary Kinsman, “The Emergence of the Neoliberal Queer: 1996–2023,” in *The Regulation of Desire* (Montréal: Concordia University Press, 2024), 238. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781988111483-016>.

<sup>64</sup> Debby Yaffe, “The Lesbian Benevolent Society or Oh No! Debby’s Got Another Scheme!” *LesbianNews*, June 1992, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Dan Brouwer, “The Precarious Visibility Politics of Self-Stigmatization: The Case of HIV= AIDS Tattoos,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 18 (1998): 118.

<sup>66</sup> Maria Brock and Emil Edenborg, “‘You Cannot Oppress Those Who Do Not Exist:’ Gay Persecution in Chechnya and the Politics of In/Visibility,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 26, no. 4 (2020): 680. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-8618730>.

As Kennedy and Davis asserted, visibility generated community networks and political consciousness.<sup>67</sup> Although visibility can be a powerful force for change, it can also place excluded groups in vulnerable positions. Increased representation of a particular group can easily be co-opted by those who do not belong to it. Lesbians have been historically inaccurately represented and practically invisible within heteronormative society.<sup>68</sup> Theorist Erin Rand argued that lesbians continued to be overlooked even within the queer community in the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>69</sup> Because of the erasure of lesbians, coming-out stories and visibility were emphasized in *LesbiaNews*. Especially considering that sexual orientation was not included in the equality provision of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms until 1996, visibility strategies were often linked to rights-based organizing. In 1991, the newsletter mentioned sexual orientation in relation to the Canadian Human Rights Act and asked readers to mail a sample protest letter to their elected official.<sup>70</sup> By 1994, the editorial page of the newsletter advocated for lesbians to organize because “Canada is not our free country with all attending rights and privileges.”<sup>71</sup> *LesbiaNews* readers also contributed writings, poems, artwork, and comics in their effort to be visible and inspire social change. The newsletter featured a column titled “shOut about it,” in which readers were encouraged to share their coming-out stories and how they were making themselves visible to the wider world.<sup>72</sup> The encouragement of visibility contributed to a communal shared experience of coming-out and thus a sense of belonging within the group.

In his book, sociologist Gerard Delanty illustrated that conceptions of community constitute a balance between the imagined and reality as a particular experience of sharing,

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<sup>67</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 184.

<sup>68</sup> Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 4.

<sup>69</sup> Erin J. Rand, “An Appetite for Activism: The Lesbian Avengers and the Queer Politics of Visibility,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 36, no. 2 (2013): 122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2013.794754>.

<sup>70</sup> SWAG, “Sexual Orientation and the Canadian Human Rights Act,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1991, 9.

<sup>71</sup> “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, May 1994, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Jacqueline B., “shOut about it - Not a Stepford Dyke,” *LesbiaNews*, June 1994, 10.

solidarity, and belonging.<sup>73</sup> He stated that “Despite its contestation, the idea of community is related to the search for belonging in the insecure conditions of modern society. Its enduring appeal is undoubtedly due to the desire for belonging, sharing and place.”<sup>74</sup> Delanty thus identified solidarity in the face of adversity as a “condition that creates communities.”<sup>75</sup> External adversity in the form of homophobia or sexism can therefore support the cohesion and sense of belonging in lesbian communities. Internal debate can also be a form of adversity, but Delanty argued that a community’s responses do not need to be identical and that varied behaviours and opinions can work to strengthen the longevity and solidarity of a community.<sup>76</sup> In alignment with Kennedy and Davis, Delanty argued that friendship groups qualify as communities due to their complex organization and their positive sense of diverse communal identity.<sup>77</sup> Delanty also argued that the success of many social movements, such as feminism and the gay rights movement, have originated in a powerful sense of positive communal identity being central to their politics.<sup>78</sup>

### **Lesbian-Feminism and the Sex Wars**

Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter’s comprehensive book, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, provides important context for the content in *LesbiaNews*.<sup>79</sup> The ‘sex wars’ refer to the series of political and cultural battles that ranged from the 1970s to the 1990s between feminists. Topics of debate included “the regulation of pornography, the scope of legal

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<sup>73</sup> Gerard Delanty, *Community*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2018), 4.

<sup>74</sup> Delanty, *Community*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Delanty, *Community*, 54.

<sup>76</sup> Delanty, *Community*, 51.

<sup>77</sup> Delanty, *Community*, 47.

<sup>78</sup> Delanty, *Community*, 143.

<sup>79</sup> Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, 10th ed (New York: Routledge, 2006).

protections for gay people, the funding of allegedly ‘obscene’ art, ... and more.’<sup>80</sup> Expressions of sexuality were often at the forefront of conversation. Duggan and Hunter argued that anti-pornography proponents framed lesbian pornography as “male-identified” and “patriarchal,” even if men are not present at all, especially towards butch-femme sex and sadomasochism (S/M).<sup>81</sup> In *LesbiaNews*, conversations about public nudity during a women-only camping trip, Pride visibility, S/M practices, and erotic literature mirrored broader lesbian-feminist sex wars debates over sexuality and respectability.

Joan Nestle was a key voice in lesbian-feminist writings about sexuality. In her 1987 book, *A Restricted Country*, Nestle used a blend of autobiographical and theoretical positioning to argue for the importance of being proudly sexual in the lesbian-feminist sex wars.<sup>82</sup> She argued that the desexualization of lesbian identities by lesbian-feminists, heterosexual and lesbian alike, was focused on gaining respectability from heterosexual society. Joan Nestle cautioned against this approach by reminding lesbians that:

In our time [the 1970s], the debate over sexuality has opened historical wounds, wounds made even deeper by the fact that now it is other lesbians who are judging the acceptability of our sexuality. This is what my history has taught me: If we choose to involve ourselves in the antipornography movement, it would be helpful to keep in mind that many of us were early victims of vice squad raids, that some of us are lesbian prostitutes and sex workers, that we have a long history of surviving and finding each other in places that other women were too frightened to walk through, that sexuality has always been our frontier.<sup>83</sup>

Nestle insisted that lesbian history could not be separated from sexual culture and warned that intra-community moral regulation could reproduce the policing once imposed from outside. Nestle resisted any attempt to define lesbianism as a primarily political sisterhood and instead

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<sup>80</sup> Duggan and Hunter, *Sex Wars*, 1.

<sup>81</sup> Duggan and Hunter, *Sex Wars*, 9-10.

<sup>82</sup> Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (New York: Firebrand Books, 1987).

<sup>83</sup> Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 116.

suggested that lesbian relationships, especially butch/femme relationships, have always involved “complex erotic statements.”<sup>84</sup>

In *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga explored the generative power dynamics of butch/femme dynamics and the politics of lesbian-feminism.<sup>85</sup> Hollibaugh and Moraga argued that heterosexual feminists had victimized all women’s sexuality in a way that lesbians were seen as sexual aggressors who recreated male objectification of women. Hollibaugh and Moraga thus critiqued the shift toward desexualized definitions of lesbianism within some lesbian-feminist circles and observed that “what grew out of this kind of ‘nonsexual’ theory was a ‘transcendent’ definition of sexuality wherein lesbianism (since it exists outside the institution of heterosexuality) came to be seen as the practice of feminism.”<sup>86</sup> They argued that those who politicized lesbianism as a solution to patriarchal oppression, inevitably, desexualized it.

In her semi-autobiographical key text, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class & Literature*, Dorothy Allison similarly argued that “Political lesbians made the concept of lust, sexual need, and passionate desire more and more detached from the definition of lesbian.”<sup>87</sup> Allison contended that to desexualize the definition of lesbian would be to render lesbians a glamorous political and theoretical construct.<sup>88</sup> Allison also argued that lesbian-feminist literature could be negatively impacted by becoming “non-explicit to the point of obscurity.”<sup>89</sup> *Skin* advocated

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<sup>84</sup> Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 100.

<sup>85</sup> Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga, “What We’re Rollin’ Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism: A Conversation Toward Ending Them,” in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc, 1992).

<sup>86</sup> Hollibaugh and Moraga, “What We’re Rollin’ Around in Bed With,” 244.

<sup>87</sup> Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class & Literature* (New York: Firebrand Books, 1994), 140.

<sup>88</sup> Allison, *Skin*, 136.

<sup>89</sup> Allison, *Skin*, 89.

instead for an organization around sexual desire that would recognize the complex reality of the lesbian experience.<sup>90</sup>

Amber Hollibaugh built on her work in *The Persistent Desire* in her vital book, *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home*.<sup>91</sup> Hollibaugh positioned her sex-positive arguments within a working-class feminist, semi-autobiographical narrative. Her views on the sex wars and lesbian-feminism were in opposition to the anti-pornography movement.<sup>92</sup> Building on Nestle, Moraga, and Allison, *My Dangerous Desires* opposed political lesbian-feminism. In conversation with scholars Gayle Rubin and Jewelle Gomez, Hollibaugh argued that “by conflating lesbianism - which I think of as a sexual and erotic experience - with feminism - a political philosophy - the ability to justify lesbianism on grounds other than feminism dropped out of the discourse [in the 1970s and 1980s].”<sup>93</sup> According to Hollibaugh, lesbianism became politically acceptable only as a political act in feminist discussions. She argued that lesbianism should not require feminist political justification to be valid, to do so would reduce it to a philosophy and erase the erotic life of many lesbians. Taken together, these authors show how lesbian-feminist theory struggled to articulate sexual desire without reproducing oppressive frameworks.<sup>94</sup>

To fully understand the lesbian-feminist debates in *LesbiaNews*, I refer to scholars within the distinctly Canadian historical context. Brenda Cossman, Shannon Bell, Lise Gotell, and Becki L. Ross collectively provide important insights in *Bad Attitudes on Trial: Pornography, Feminism, and the Butler Decision*,<sup>95</sup> on Canada’s legal and political landscape in the late 1980s

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<sup>90</sup> Allison, *Skin*, 141.

<sup>91</sup> Amber L. Hollibaugh, *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>92</sup> Hollibaugh, *My Dangerous Desires*, 132.

<sup>93</sup> Hollibaugh, *My Dangerous Desires*, 123.

<sup>94</sup> Hollibaugh, *My Dangerous Desires*, 122.

<sup>95</sup> Brenda Cossman, Shannon Bell, Lise Gotell, and Becki L. Ross, *Bad Attitudes on Trial: Pornography, Feminism, and the Butler Decision* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997). <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442671157>

and 1990s. In 1992, the Supreme Court's *Butler* decision upheld "the constitutionality of the [pre-existing] obscenity laws but also set out a new test [harm to women] for determining whether representations are obscene."<sup>96</sup> The authors of *Bad Attitudes* argued that the ruling merged feminist anti-pornography arguments with state censorship power. The ruling meant that gay and lesbian erotic literature could be deemed obscene and was therefore extremely legally vulnerable to state censorship. *Bad Attitudes* noted that only six weeks after the ruling, police raided and charged a gay and lesbian bookstore in Toronto for selling an American lesbian erotic fiction magazine containing S/M content.<sup>97</sup> Historian Whitney Strub similarly argued that lesbian content was targeted and subsequently suppressed or censored in the U.S. as well.<sup>98</sup> Strub's analysis of state censorship mapped the historical targeting of lesbian materials being conflated with 'obscenity' as a tool of enforcing heteronormativity.<sup>99</sup> Canada has a long history of repressing many forms of sexual imagery, "but the *Butler* decision has lent legitimacy to this censorial climate"<sup>100</sup> and disproportionately targeted lesbian and gay materials.

Scholar Gary Kinsman argued that the combination of legal, political, and personal debates within the lesbian-feminist sex wars related to conflicting ideologies on the progression of the gay liberation movement. Kinsman argued that the Canadian "construction of a 'responsible' and 'respectable' queer politics was part of the formation of a new white, middle-class elite."<sup>101</sup> He identified that efforts to achieve equal status and respectability within the law, such as the *Butler* ruling, have been critiqued for limiting what began as a liberation movement into the confines of a neoliberal capitalist framework.<sup>102</sup> Kinsman noted that this shift

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<sup>96</sup> Cossman, Bell, Gotell, and Ross, *Bad Attitudes on Trial*, 4.

<sup>97</sup> Cossman, Bell, Gotell, and Ross, *Bad Attitudes on Trial*, 4.

<sup>98</sup> Whitney Strub, "Lavender, Menaced: Lesbianism, Obscenity Law, and the Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement," *Journal of Women's History* 22.2 (Summer, 2010): 99.

<sup>99</sup> Strub, "Lavender, Menaced," 87-88.

<sup>100</sup> Cossman, Bell, Gotell, and Ross, *Bad Attitudes on Trial*, 7.

<sup>101</sup> Kinsman, "The Emergence of the Neoliberal Queer," 289.

<sup>102</sup> Kinsman, "The Emergence of the Neoliberal Queer," 290.

reorganized a transformative social movement to accommodate a racist, capitalist, and patriarchal state.<sup>103</sup> This strategy also risked failing queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit People, as it required negotiating recognition from the Canadian settler-colonial state. Therefore, within the pages of *LesbianNews*, debates about the importance of sexual lesbian identities and materials were not merely theoretical reflections of the sex wars. In Victoria, lesbian-feminist debates had immediate legal and political implications.

In addition, Jay Daniel Thompson argued that anti-pornography frameworks often rely on a certain oppressive model of patriarchal heterosexuality that was then applied broadly, even to pornography that was produced by and for queers.<sup>104</sup> According to Thompson, anti-pornography discourses can inadvertently reproduce a dominant man and subordinated woman binary or imply that heterosexual sex in itself is sexist. In doing so, he noted that gender hierarchy and heterosexuality were collapsed and silently repeated so that “heterosexuality is in fact pervasive and invisible.”<sup>105</sup> The anti-pornography feminist framework used to critique patriarchal heterosexuality, can thus end up universalizing the very framework it aims to critique. Thompson regards heterosexuality as a political and social institution that pervasively and invisibly organizes society. While Rich argued that heterosexuality is structurally coercive, Thompson emphasized how heterosexuality functions as an invisible organizing institution, even when feminist critiques attempted to expose it. Within *LesbianNews*, contributors debated their interpretations of pornography and explicit sexual language, especially in reference to its potential connections to patriarchy.

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<sup>103</sup> Kinsman, “The Emergence of the Neoliberal Queer,” 291.

<sup>104</sup> Jay Daniel Thompson, “Invisible and Everywhere: Heterosexuality in Anti-Pornography Feminism,” *Sexualities* 18, 5/6 (2015): 750.

<sup>105</sup> Thompson, “Invisible and Everywhere,” 753.

Ann Ciasullo's article, "Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s," examined mainstream society's interpretation of these debates.<sup>106</sup> Ciasullo's research focused on the cultural phenomenon of 'lesbian chic.' Lesbian chic refers to images of lesbianism that were fashionable and marketable to capitalist society. The images misinterpreted lesbian-feminist calls for visibility and instead normalized/heterosexualized lesbians only through white, femme, middle or upper-class bodies.<sup>107</sup> For example, mainstream magazines such as *New York*, *Newsweek*, and *Vanity Fair* featured images of white, upper/middle-class lesbians on their covers.<sup>108</sup> Lesbians who were butch, non-white, working-class, or disabled were still virtually invisible or pathologized in heteronormative society.<sup>109</sup> Within *LesbiaNews*, editor Barbara McLauchlin observed that "90s lesbian chic does not represent unconditional love and acceptance [of all lesbians]."<sup>110</sup> Ciasullo argued that lesbian chic ultimately depoliticized and desexualized lesbians further by turning their sexuality into a "novelty, a fad, something to be consumed and played with."<sup>111</sup> Ciasullo's intervention is important because it shows how mainstream society misinterpreted lesbians' political demands for representation and instead, commodified lesbians in response.

Ultimately, existing scholarship has shown feminist print culture as oppositional infrastructure, lesbian-feminism as the site of ideological and tangible tensions, and queer community as either cohesive or fragmented. By placing *LesbiaNews* at the intersection of these literatures, this thesis argues that debate, fragmentation, and negotiation were not signs of failure but evidence of vitality and are all generative within a community. Therefore, *LesbiaNews*

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<sup>106</sup> Ann M. Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001): 577–608. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178806>.

<sup>107</sup> Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible," 578.

<sup>108</sup> Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible," 582.

<sup>109</sup> Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible," 578.

<sup>110</sup> Barbara McLauchlin, "Lesbian Film Night - More Please," *LesbiaNews*, February 1994, 10.

<sup>111</sup> Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible," 577.

demonstrates that a community forum encouraging generative debates enabled the consultation of diverse viewpoints and strengthened community solidarity. As the following chapter demonstrates, the newsletter became a central forum through which Victoria lesbians articulated belonging, respectful disagreement, as well as political and sexual identity.

## **Chapter Two: *LesbiaNews*: “Victoria’s Monthly Lesbian Feminist Newsletter”<sup>112</sup>**

From 1989 to 1996, *LesbiaNews* produced issues ranging between twelve and twenty pages on a monthly basis. On average, there were at least six paid advertisements per issue, including scanned business card ads, display page ads, and classified ads/notices in the last few pages. When sold separately, each issue could be purchased at Everywoman’s Books, a feminist bookstore located in downtown Victoria, for \$2.00, then \$2.50, when prices increased a few years into production.<sup>113</sup> Annual subscriptions sent via mail could be purchased for \$20.00 per year.<sup>114</sup> The revenue from paid advertisements, singular copy purchases, and annual subscriptions covered the production costs of the newsletter. While the editors of *LesbiaNews* tracked the approximate number of annual subscriptions, they did not track how many readers may have purchased singular editions. In November of 1990, *LesbiaNews* reported that the number of subscriptions increased from 15 to 85.<sup>115</sup> By April 1995, the newsletter had an estimated 800-person readership.<sup>116</sup> *LesbiaNews* was originally produced and distributed for readers in Victoria, B.C., but it was eventually mailed to subscribers across Canada.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> “LesbiaNews,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1989, 1.

<sup>113</sup> “A Short Guide to Comparative Religions,” *LesbiaNews*, February 1992, 1.

<sup>114</sup> Joan Garcia, “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1992, 2.

<sup>115</sup> Debby Yaffe, “LesbiaNews’ Birthday,” *LesbiaNews*, November 1990, 2.

<sup>116</sup> Barbara McLauchlin, “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, April 1995, 2.

<sup>117</sup> Florence Brown, “A Letter from Montreal,” *LesbiaNews*, February 1990, 8.

In Victoria, *LesbiaNews* contributors often provided descriptions of the city. Contributors variously described Victoria as an expensive place,<sup>118</sup> politically apathetic,<sup>119</sup> and a “queer Mecca.”<sup>120</sup> Editor Barbara McLauchlin described Victoria as “a heavily white-anglo area”<sup>121</sup> and thought of it as mostly “middle class.”<sup>122</sup> These comments provide valuable context for how the lesbian community viewed the socio-economic and political landscape of their city. Additionally, in reference to Victoria being a smaller metropolitan area of B.C., contributor Reva Hutkin wrote that the lesbian community in the city was “too small for factions and major dissent.”<sup>123</sup> By 1996, the population of Greater Victoria was approximately 304,287.<sup>124</sup> For comparison, the population of the Greater Vancouver Regional District was 1,831,665 in 1996.<sup>125</sup> Hutkin’s comment suggests that the relatively smaller size of the city impacted the cohesion of the lesbian community. The relative size of Vancouver in comparison to Victoria also contributed to Vancouver-based feminist newsletter *Kinesis*’s prominence; *Kinesis* was referenced by scholars of print literature, whereas *LesbiaNews* was not.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Tanya Anderson, “Getting \$et for the Future,” *LesbiaNews*, July/August 1995, 13.

<sup>119</sup> Debby Yaffe, “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, July/August 1991, 2.

<sup>120</sup> Reva Hutkin and Liz G, “Campout,” *LesbiaNews*, November 1994, 4.

<sup>121</sup> Debby Yaffe, “Dynamics of Color: Building a Stronger Lesbian Community,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1989, 9.

<sup>122</sup> Barbara McLauchlin, “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, May 1995, 2.

<sup>123</sup> Reva Hutkin, “Waltzing Down Memory Lane with Reva Hutkin,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1990, 3.

<sup>124</sup> Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, “2006 Census: Census Trends - Selected Trend Data for Victoria (CMA), 2006, 2001 and 1996 Censuses,” Canada.

<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2006/dp-pd/92-596/P1-2.cfm?TID=100&Lang=eng&T=CMA&PRCODE=59&GEOCODE=935>.

<sup>125</sup> Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, “1996 Census of Canada: Data Tables – Urban and Rural Population, for Census Divisions and Census Subdivisions (Municipalities), 1996 Census - 100% Data,” 105 1997.

<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/English/census96/data/tables/Rp-eng.cfm?TABID=2&LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=1&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=1&GC=0&GID=204698&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=1019&PRID=0&PTYPE=89103&S=0&SHOWALL=No&SUB=0&Temporal=2006&THEME=18&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=&D1=0&D2=0&D3=0&D4=0&D5=0&D6=0>.

<sup>126</sup> Marshall, “Communication as Politics: Feminist Print Media in English Canada,” (1995): 468.

## The Canadian Feminist Print Literature Movement

Between 1989 and 1996, numerous lesbian and feminist books, films, scholars, and articles were reviewed, recommended, and engaged with by readers and contributors of *LesbiaNews*. For example, the newsletter promoted an upcoming talk at the University of Victoria by feminist scholar and anti-pornography advocate Andrea Dworkin in 1989.<sup>127</sup> Contributors also reviewed literature in stand-alone articles<sup>128</sup> or in recurring columns such as “Lezzy Lit Book Reviews.”<sup>129</sup> For instance, Kitty Tsui’s book, *From Nice Chinese Girl to Sexual Outlaw*, was mentioned by Nancy Issenman in an article about sexuality and censorship.<sup>130</sup> Joan Nestle’s book *A Restricted Country* was reviewed and recommended to readers as a fundamental text in the 1992 July/August<sup>131</sup> and November issues.<sup>132</sup> *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, edited by Joan Nestle, was also recommended to readers.<sup>133</sup> The documentary film *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*, about the lives of 1950s and 1960s lesbians, explored how lesbian pulp novels “inform[ed] lesbian history and mythology generally.”<sup>134</sup> Audre Lorde’s book *Sister Outsider* was recommended to readers in a memorial article for Lorde.<sup>135</sup>

In another *LesbiaNews* article, contributor Elizabeth Chandler discussed feminist literature in reference to a discussion of Rich’s essay in a Women’s Studies class. The conversation left her “with huge feelings of anger, sadness, and frustration, both at my own fear of speaking from an emotionally charged place, and at the intellectual and patronizing discussion

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<sup>127</sup> “Calendar,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1989, 11.

<sup>128</sup> Liz Van Berkle, “Reviews,” *LesbiaNews*, December/January 1992/1993, 5.

<sup>129</sup> “Lezzy Lit Book Reviews,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1994, 3.

<sup>130</sup> Nancy Issenman, “Controversy, Sexuality and Censorship,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1990, 10.

<sup>131</sup> Jahnet Hewsick, “Praise for Ourselves,” *LesbiaNews*, July/August 1992, 8.

<sup>132</sup> Jahnet Hewsick, “These Are a Few of My Favourite Zings,” *LesbiaNews*, November 1992, 5.

<sup>133</sup> Jahnet Hewsick, “These Are a Few of My Favourite Zings,” *LesbiaNews*, November 1992, 5.

<sup>134</sup> Liz Van Berkle, “Reviews,” *LesbiaNews*, December 1992/January 1993, 5.

<sup>135</sup> Joan Garcia, “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1993, 2.

and dismissal of my reality.”<sup>136</sup> In this example, Chandler worried that Rich’s theory of a ‘lesbian continuum’ might relegate lesbianism to a political position where it would lose its sexual meanings. Whether or not her emotional reaction is what her classmates or Rich intended, Chandler’s concern exemplifies the central critique of lesbian-feminism, reducing lesbianism to a political position. Chandler’s engagement with Rich and the other feminist or lesbian works mentioned are only a few examples of the extensive literature that was addressed or negotiated in *LesbiaNews*.

The contributors and readers of *LesbiaNews* were not only a part of the Canadian feminist print literature movement, but they were also aware of their position within it. They participated in continent-wide feminist discourse and the newsletter encouraged readers to contribute to upcoming anthologies that would be published.<sup>137</sup> Other lesbian or women’s newsletters and magazines referenced by *LesbiaNews* included *Kinesis*,<sup>138</sup> *Ms. Magazine*,<sup>139</sup> *OPEN DOOR*,<sup>140</sup> *Labrys*,<sup>141</sup> and *Deneuve*.<sup>142</sup> *LesbiaNews* was aware of its location and relationship to other media in the Canadian and American feminist print literature movement and contributed by creating their own newsletter to be in conversation with other feminists and lesbian thinkers.

## Community

The demographics of Victoria’s lesbian community inform how those involved in *LesbiaNews* contended with the concerns of racism and classism. In the first year of the newsletter’s production, editor Debby Yaffe asked readers, “What are we doing locally about

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<sup>136</sup> Elizabeth Chandler, “Wanna Hold My Hand?” *LesbiaNews*, June 1993, 1, 9.

<sup>137</sup> “Anthology by Disabled Lesbians - Call for Submissions,” *LesbiaNews*, July/August 1992, 11.

<sup>138</sup> “In the News- Excerpts from Kinesis,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1992, 9.

<sup>139</sup> “Ads and Notices,” *LesbiaNews*, May 1993, 15.

<sup>140</sup> “Ads and Notices,” *LesbiaNews*, July/ August 1993, 11.

<sup>141</sup> Barbara McLaughlin, “Labrys Gives Ottawa Lesbian Voice,” *LesbiaNews*, July/ August 1995, 13.

<sup>142</sup> Mary Lasovich, “Quotes n’ Queries,” *LesbiaNews*, February 1996, 4.

racism in the lesbian community?”<sup>143</sup> She went on to say, “If we don’t make particular efforts to include these women, then we are effectively excluding them.” The use of the plural “them” at the end of the statement implies that Yaffe assumed her readership to be predominantly white. Similarly, she continued, “What racism, you ask?” This further assumed speaking to a readership that was seemingly unaware of racism in Victoria. Yaffe invited readers to write in and share their thoughts about racism in the lesbian community. Three issues later, Joan Garcia responded. Since moving to Victoria, she noticed “shade racism.” Garcia identified herself as a “cross-cultural/ bi-racial/ Lesbian-feminist” and confirmed that in her experience, “racism is very serious business, and it is alive in Victoria.”<sup>144</sup> In the article, Garcia described racial tokenism, colourism, and microaggressions in her assessment of Victoria’s public culture. In response to racism in Victoria and second-wave feminist thinkers of colour, antiracist workshop advertisements appear occasionally throughout *LesbiaNews*. The most comprehensive description of one of these workshops comes from July 1990, written by Donna Murray, Glennie McKirdy, and Christine Morissette.<sup>145</sup> This weekend workshop was sponsored by Status of Women Action Group (SWAG) and was directed by two facilitators from Vancouver with Alliance of Women Against Racism Etc. (AWARE).<sup>146</sup> McKirdy wrote, “It was exciting to have this workshop in Victoria and to have so many women there.”<sup>147</sup> The effort to hold an antiracist workshop and the invitation for contributors to discuss racism show that the white lesbian community in Victoria was making an effort to “unlearn racism.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Debby Yaffe, “Dynamics of Color: Building a Stronger Lesbian Community,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1989, 9.

<sup>144</sup> Joan Garcia, “More on Racism,” *LesbiaNews*, December 1989, 2-3.

<sup>145</sup> Donna Murray, Glennie McKirdy, and Christine Morissette, “Unlearning Racism,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1990, 7-10.

<sup>146</sup> Donna Murray, “Unlearning Racism,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1990, 7.

<sup>147</sup> Glennie McKirdy, “Unlearning Racism,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1990, 8.

<sup>148</sup> Donna Murray, Glennie McKirdy, and Christine Morissette, “Unlearning Racism,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1990, 7-10.

Class divisions were also examined in *LesbiaNews* in relation to Victoria's entire population and of lesbians in particular. The January 1991 "money"<sup>149</sup> themed issue and the September 1992 "poverty"<sup>150</sup> issue were rich in class and financial analysis. Contributor Bonnie Waterstone observed that "these days a lot of lesbians are 'making it' getting better jobs, buying houses, getting comfortable and enjoying material goodies."<sup>151</sup> Waterstone's statement alluded to a social shift in lesbian and gay acceptance leading to an economic shift of many lesbians moving out of the working class. Waterstone's article connects to Kinsman's identification of a "new white, middle-class elite" in queer politics and communities.<sup>152</sup> Kinsman argued that the rise of neoliberal values and individualistic capitalist frameworks in the 1980s–1990s changed the trajectory of the gay liberation movement. Waterstone's use of the phrasing "getting comfortable" denotes a sense of complacency from lesbians who were benefitting from individual economic upper mobility but perhaps leaving behind working-class lesbians, such as those that Kennedy and Davis identified.<sup>153</sup> The 1992 poverty issue revealed that many people in Victoria were "ill-informed" about poverty.<sup>154</sup> In an interview with Silvia Vilches, a representative of Together Against Poverty Society (TAPS), contributor Kelevelyn Hurley learned about the feminization of poverty and the higher economic risk of lesbian women, especially those with children.<sup>155</sup> Hurley suggested a classism workshop to provide facts about the reality of poverty and for women to learn through an experiential board game called "The Poverty Game."<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> "Cover Page," *LesbiaNews*, January 1991, 1.

<sup>150</sup> "Cover Page," *LesbiaNews*, September 1992, 1.

<sup>151</sup> Bonnie Waterstone, "Money Money Money," *LesbiaNews*, January 1991, 6-7.

<sup>152</sup> Kinsman, "The Emergence of the Neoliberal Queer," 289.

<sup>153</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 2.

<sup>154</sup> Joan Garcia, "Editorial," *LesbiaNews*, September 1992, 2.

<sup>155</sup> Kelevelyn Hurley, "The Poverty Game™," *LesbiaNews*, September 1992, 7.

<sup>156</sup> Hurley, "The Poverty Game™," 6.

Although the newsletter worked to challenge racism and classism, white feminist lack of intersectional nuance also appears in *LesbiaNews*. In an article titled “From Bondage to Bonding,” Sara Joy David compared the “psychological oppression of women” to a form of “blind masochism and slave mentality.”<sup>157</sup> The diminishment of slavery to a “mentality” discounts and metaphorizes the historical experiences of Black women who had been enslaved under a racist and sexist conditions. In a similar example, Barbara McLauchlin lacked intersectional awareness in a review of a community music group. She wrote that the choir sang “a Black song of struggle, anger, lust for freedom. It could have been ours.”<sup>158</sup> While her comment did acknowledge a shared struggle for liberation, it missed how these two oppressions overlap for Black lesbians. The use of the possessive pronoun “ours” denotes an implicit binary between a projected ‘us’ vs. ‘them,’ wherein the ‘us’ was presumed to be white. Both of these examples show an appropriation of distinct discriminatory experiences through the use of analogy.

Furthermore, some contributors who echoed radical and/or separatist lesbian-feminist politics organized around the principle that heteropatriarchy was the single most oppressive force in society across history.<sup>159</sup> As Audre Lorde<sup>160</sup> and the Combahee River Collective<sup>161</sup> have critiqued, radical and/or separatist lesbian-feminism can often essentialize patriarchal oppression without considering its intersections. Examples in the newsletter essentialize intersectional oppressions through repeated use of the timeline of 6000 years of patriarchy, as a presumed historical fact across time and space. In response to the horrific Ecole Polytechnique Massacre in Montreal in 1989, a contributor called the violence a result of “6000 years of oppression.”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Sara Joy David, “From Bondage to Bonding,” *LesbiaNews*, January 1990, 6.

<sup>158</sup> Barbara McLauchlin, “Mosaic Scores Bridges Beautifully,” *LesbiaNews*, April 1994, 1.

<sup>159</sup> *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*, eds. Bell D and Klein R (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1996).

<sup>160</sup> Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” 90–93.

<sup>161</sup> Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” 214.

<sup>162</sup> Florence Brown, “Letter from Montreal,” *LesbiaNews*, February 1990, 9.

Contributor and editor Zorya Alexandra Plaskin also used a version of the phrase “6000 years ago” in an article about the search for lesbian history in ancient mythology. Plaskin used the phrase to posit that the separation between women and men, through the introduction of patriarchy, was the original manifestation of lesbianism.<sup>163</sup> In another example, a prompt provided for a *LesbiaNews* essay contest suggested that entrants could write about “what 6000 years of patriarchy means to me.”<sup>164</sup> The repeated use of an all-encompassing 6000 year timeline by contributors obscured the historical complexity of oppression and interlocking hierarchies across time and cultural context. This reveals how these contributors’ understanding of women’s oppression foregrounded men’s power over other oppressive forces.

Over the course of seven years, *LesbiaNews* contributors were deeply devoted to sharing their understandings of the lesbian community in Victoria. In the first issue of *LesbiaNews*, editor Debby Yaffe wrote that aside from the monthly coffee house and the annual GALA, “all lesbian activity in our town seems to take place in private. There is no ongoing public sense in which we are a community.”<sup>165</sup> The newsletter’s founding goal was to remedy this by creating a monthly newsletter in which the lesbian community could have a consistent forum for public discussion and connection. Throughout *LesbiaNews*’s publication, editors and contributors repeatedly echoed this goal, often seeing the newsletter itself as a space through which community could be produced, shared, and negotiated. I have organized contributors’ understandings into four categories: the difficult to find category, the critical category, the positive category, and the acknowledgment of the diversity category.

Multiple contributors described the community as difficult to find or access. In volume 1, issue 6, editor Debby Yaffe wrote that the community “seems very amorphous and nebulous to

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<sup>163</sup> Zorya Alexandra Plaskin, “The Mythical Lesbian,” *LesbiaNews*, December/ January 1993/ 1994, 3.

<sup>164</sup> “Cover Page,” *LesbiaNews*, May 1994, 1.

<sup>165</sup> Debby Yaffe, “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1989, 2.

me – which is one reason I started this newsletter.”<sup>166</sup> She asked long-term residents of Victoria to write in and share whether there is another hidden level of community of which she was unaware. Her comment suggests that perhaps multiple forms of community could be happening simultaneously but were difficult to access. In her letter to the editor, Christine Morissette wrote that “though ‘community’ is sometimes an elusive place, we all belong here together.”<sup>167</sup> Her statement suggested that although the community could be hard to find, those who do find it would be welcomed. In a piece titled “In Search of Community,” Barbara McLauchlin argued that “maybe lesbians know it better than others on this planet ... If you want community you have to be a part of it.”<sup>168</sup> While she did not elaborate on why lesbians might uniquely experience this search, she suggested that participation itself was necessary to locate an elusive community. Ultimately, contributors who suggested that the community was hard to find did not negate its existence and, in fact, contributed to the discoverability of the community by participating in a publicly accessible newsletter.

Some contributors acknowledged the existence of lesbian community but were critical of it. For example, Jacqueline B. wrote that after coming out, she found that the prescribed lesbian archetype and style did not fit her. Because of this, she argued that “Lesbian communities are not, in my experience, willing to throw a life vest out to those women swimming in the waters of confusion.”<sup>169</sup> In her experience, the lesbian community had particular expectations of feminist political leanings and required new entrants to learn them on their own first. In an article about her own experiences, Zorya Alexandra Plaskin suggested that other lesbians in Victoria who understood community as a place to only achieve a “cure-all” form of consensus were ignoring

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<sup>166</sup> Debby Yaffe, “Editorial Musing,” *LesbiaNews*, February 1990, 2.

<sup>167</sup> Christine Morissette, “Letters to the Editor,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1991, 3.

<sup>168</sup> Barbara McLauchlin, “In Search of Community,” *LesbiaNews*, December 1995, 8.

<sup>169</sup> Jacqueline B., “shOut about it - Not a Stepford Dyke,” *LesbiaNews*, June 1994, 10.

the importance of debate and conflict.<sup>170</sup> Similarly, Helen Story suggested that, “Where we used to have a lesbian movement, we now only have a ‘community’ which is taking on all the worst attributes of a family.”<sup>171</sup> Story’s comment also recognized an emphasis on keeping the peace instead of challenging each other politically. Another contributor, Steph Ozard, described experiencing exclusion directly. Ozard expressed disappointment after encountering ageism, fatphobia, and religious intolerance within the community.<sup>172</sup> She wrote that internal exclusions were especially disappointing “after bragging to my Hetero friends and relatives that our [lesbian] community was past all this.”<sup>173</sup> Contrary to Kennedy and Davis’s assumption that those who had negative experiences with the lesbian community likely would not want to discuss it at all,<sup>174</sup> *LesbiaNews* contributors subverted this premise by readily sharing their criticisms.

Other contributors went further and questioned whether the lesbian community existed in Victoria at all. Long-time Victoria resident, Reva Hutkin, wrote that she was unsure if community existed in Victoria for anyone anymore. Since “lesbians in the world are a microcosm of the larger society in which we live,” she argued that lesbian community does not exist either.<sup>175</sup> Rather than a cohesive network that knew and took care of one another, Hutkin believed that there are simply different individuals with different interests and friends who only shared a “sexual preference.”<sup>176</sup> Two years later, a letter from Debby Yaffe echoed Hutkin’s sentiment and attributed the lack of cohesion to the generational gap in the lesbian community. Yaffe suggested that instead of a unified community, Victoria had “a series of overlapping, interlinking friendship circles which sort of coexist in the same space.”<sup>177</sup> At the level of theory,

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<sup>170</sup> Plaskin, “Consensus: Myths, Monsters, and Motherhood,” 1.

<sup>171</sup> Helen Story, “Dear LesbiaNews,” *LesbiaNews*, May 1995, 4.

<sup>172</sup> Steph Ozard, “Letters: Dear Editor,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1991, 2.

<sup>173</sup> Ozard, “Letters: Dear Editor,” 2.

<sup>174</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 24.

<sup>175</sup> Reva Hutkin, “More on Community,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1990, 2.

<sup>176</sup> Hutkin, “More on Community,” 2.

<sup>177</sup> Debby Yaffe, “Dear LNews,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1992, 4.

Delanty's sociological studies of communities argued that friendship groups can qualify as communities because of their complex organizational structures and their positive sense of diverse communal identity.<sup>178</sup> Importantly though, these critical assessments still actively participated in the newsletter's collective dialogue. To some extent, these contributors were invested in the forum of communal discussion that *LesbiaNews* represented.

Many contributors evaluated the lesbian community in more positive terms. In these accounts, a sense of community was informed by the newsletter as a forum as well as through the activities and relationships it facilitated. One anonymous contributor suggested that "lesbian community is a process as well as place; it is about women valuing themselves and each other, and we create it by being who we are."<sup>179</sup> This definition framed the lesbian community as something continuously reproduced through relationships between women. Emphasizing the role of the newsletter in fostering connections, contributor Janet Stewart wrote that when she bought a copy of *LesbiaNews*, she discovered "a community of intelligent and passionate women, involved in creating and expressing their personal lesbian realities."<sup>180</sup> Another similar account from Andrea Maurer thanked *LesbiaNews* for its announcement of a dyke social club, where she was able to make friends.<sup>181</sup> For Stewart and Maurer, the newsletter functioned as both a forum for local lesbians and a catalyst for meaningful, real-world relationships. Editor Barbara McLauchlin wrote that "we are blessed in Victoria to have a community that seems responsible to personal growth and change."<sup>182</sup> McLauchlin's account suggested that the community not only existed, but that it could adapt to support the needs of its members. In another instance, contributor Jannit Rabinovitch publicly thanked the community for its support after a traumatic

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<sup>178</sup> Delanty, *Community*, 47.

<sup>179</sup> Ann O'Nymous, "An Open Letter in Response to Some Thoughts on Community," *LesbiaNews*, May 1990, 3.

<sup>180</sup> Janet Stewart, "Dear LNews," *LesbiaNews*, July/ August 1992, 4.

<sup>181</sup> Andrea Maurer, "Coming Out Story," *LesbiaNews*, October 1995, 4.

<sup>182</sup> Barbara McLauchlin, "Editorial," *LesbiaNews*, October 1995, 2.

experience. She wrote, “I couldn’t have done it without you. Thank you all.”<sup>183</sup> For Rabinovitch, the lesbian community supported her as a “family.”<sup>184</sup> Her use of the newsletter as a space to share her appreciation shows the embeddedness of *LesbiaNews* as a communication tool. In an interview with Alix Dobkin in 1994 she said “community is bigger than we are – a feeling of being a part of something incredibly wonderful.”<sup>185</sup> Dobkin’s understanding of community extended beyond Victoria and positively acknowledged a broader lesbian solidarity.

Finally, several contributors and editors acknowledged both the positive and negative traits of the lesbian community by emphasizing its diversity. The variety of interests and subgroups were evidenced by the wide array of clubs, activities, and directory services in the “Ads and Notices” or the “Services/Activities/Contacts” section of each issue.<sup>186</sup> Diversity was a key value of the *LesbiaNews* creators since anyone could contribute to the newsletter. A column in every issue stated, “we’ll print it as long as it’s not sexist- racist- homophobic- antisemitic- ageist- classist- ablebodyist- personal attackist- or boringist.”<sup>187</sup> Other than these guidelines to maintain respectful discourse, the newsletter was an open forum. People could write anonymously or be identified and contribute their opinion, art, or business. Over the years, the role of editor was intentionally passed on to diversify the newsletter’s editorial style<sup>188</sup> from Debby Yaffe, to Joan Garcia and Karey Perks, to Barbara McLaughlin, Zorya Alexandra Plaskin, and Shelagh Plunkett.<sup>189</sup> The diversity of contributors, editors, and readers was exemplified in the “Strange Bedmates” 1992 issue of *LesbiaNews*.<sup>190</sup> The cover art, created by Kathy Cruzille,

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<sup>183</sup> Jannit Rabinovitch, “We are Family,” *LesbiaNews*, December 1990, 9.

<sup>184</sup> Rabinovitch, “We are Family,” 9.

<sup>185</sup> Alix Dobkin, “Community is at the End of a Longing to Belong - Tribe Looking for a Home?” *LesbiaNews*, July 1994, 9.

<sup>186</sup> Example in “Announcements, Ads and Notices,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1996, 16.

<sup>187</sup> Editors, “LesbiaNews,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1989, 2.

<sup>188</sup> Debby Yaffe, “Editor Notes,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1990, 2.

<sup>189</sup> Freeman, “A Public Sense of Ourselves,” 146.

<sup>190</sup> Kathy Cruzille, “Strange Bedmates,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1992, 1.

featured a diverse range of people walking together at a protest.<sup>191</sup> On the inside of the issue, Kelevelyn Hurley suggested that embracing diversity and making alliances with others who experienced discrimination were necessary to fight oppression.<sup>192</sup> Editor Karey Perks similarly wrote that “we are coming together and getting to know each other as a community. With this coming together of diverse personalities, we are also going to be sharing diverse opinions, ideas, goals, control issues and fears of change – the growing pains of an emerging Victoria lesbian nation.”<sup>193</sup> In this view, Perks contended that diversity and disagreements might be difficult to navigate at first, but were signs of a developing community rather than evidence of failure or a lack thereof. In another article, A. Bond explained that when she first came out, she assumed all lesbians would be part of one uniform community.<sup>194</sup> She soon discovered that differences in opinions and lifestyles could lead to conflict. As a result, Bond came to define her subsection of community as a smaller group of lesbian friends she could “count on.”<sup>195</sup> Contributor Carla Trujillo also acknowledged that diversity could lead to conflict but argued that “creating community means we must all make a continual effort to ... dispel our insecurities about feeling that we need to be perfect with respect to issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on. Fear of making errors keeps us defensive, hostile, and unable to truly open up to one another.”<sup>196</sup> In this statement, Trujillo acknowledged that reconciling intersectional identities might lead to conflict but that these efforts were necessary to address oppression. Similarly, in an article about the monthly coffee house “Hot Flashes,” Lahl Sardyke wrote that, “within that group we [lesbians] form alliances and affections that create groupings of us, so we have communities

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<sup>191</sup> Cruzille, “Strange Bedmates,” 1.

<sup>192</sup> Kelevelyn Hurley, “Estranged Bedbugs or There More in Those Woods Than Teddy Bears,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1992, 6.

<sup>193</sup> Karey Perks, “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1994, 2.

<sup>194</sup> A. Bond, “... On Community,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1990, 13.

<sup>195</sup> A. Bond, “... On Community,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1990, 13.

<sup>196</sup> Carla Trujillo, “Believing In Ourselves Excerpt,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1992, 10.

within our community.”<sup>197</sup> Instead of seeing these smaller subsections as fractures, Sardyke suggested that they could be understood as the smaller parts of a larger whole. Despite contributors’ various understanding of Victoria’s lesbian community, the newsletter was a forum for communication and exchange.<sup>198</sup> These examples suggest that the fragmentations Freeman described in her work about *LesbiaNews*<sup>199</sup> were, in reality, the outcome of a forum that encouraged generative debates and enabled the consultation of diverse viewpoints. By providing a space for debate about the community, the newsletter helped create it.

### **Lesbian-Feminism and the Sex Wars**

Differences in opinion within the Victoria lesbian community became especially pronounced in the newsletter’s debates about respectability and sexuality. Discussions about S/M practices, the censorship of pornography, public nudity at a women-only event, Pride visibility, and erotic literature reflected the lesbian-feminist debates that divided feminists during the 1980s and 1990s. Responding to one another through editorials, letters to the editor, and creative writing, contributors negotiated questions about sexual expression, feminist politics, and respectability politics that impacted public perception of the community.

In relation to the critiques of lesbian-feminist desexualizing language from Nestle and Allison, contributor Florence Brown felt a love poem she received from another woman conjured “negative visions, apparitions of men pinning down women and forcefully abusing them.”<sup>200</sup> In particular through its use of the phrase, “sucked her cunt and licked her ass.”<sup>201</sup> The poem that Brown wrote in response was only vaguely sexual in its language, preferring the phrasing, “so

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<sup>197</sup> Karey Perks, “Coffee House Comes Home To Roast But Where Has Everyone Bean?” *LesbiaNews*, March 1995, 1.

<sup>198</sup> Debby Yaffe, “Some Thoughts on Community,” *LesbiaNews*, April 1990, 8.

<sup>199</sup> Freeman, “A Public Sense of Ourselves,” 146.

<sup>200</sup> Florence Brown, “Language of Love,” *LesbiaNews*, April 1990, 2.

<sup>201</sup> Florence Brown, “Language of Love,” *LesbiaNews*, April 1990, 2.

fresh and fragrant, I find her lovely plant.”<sup>202</sup> While Brown is entitled to her own preferences of sexual language, her conflation of all sexual lexicon with patriarchal values misinterpreted the first poem and replaced its explicit descriptions with desexualized allusory metaphors.

The first discussion of S/M appeared in a review by Nancy Isсенman of a Vancouver photography exhibition that featured black-and-white images depicting a range of S/M practices. In her response to the exhibit, Isсенman reflected on the power of erotic imagery. When it came to personal decisions of comfortability and understanding, she suggested that, “I guess we draw the line at the things we fear in ourselves.”<sup>203</sup> She asked readers a series of questions: “What are we allowed to call ourselves/each other? What is appropriate to wear? ... What did we lose in self-respect and fun for the relatively low level of anti-gay violence?”<sup>204</sup> Isсенman’s last question relates to a wider debate within the lesbian and gay movement about the costs of appealing to the state for respectability. While these questions have potentially contentious meanings, her curiosity opened the topic of S/M in the newsletter. An anonymous contributor responded by vehemently arguing against S/M, describing it as “brutalization defended as eroticism.”<sup>205</sup> Ann O’Nymous urged practitioners to “Just stay out of the way and let some of us get on with trying to make the world better, because every day on this planet millions of women and children endure a lot of pain and violence that isn’t safe, sane or consensual.”<sup>206</sup> These contrasting responses illustrate the range of differences in opinions among lesbian-feminists about whether S/M represented sexual liberation or the reproduction of patriarchal violence.

The 1992 *Butler* ruling, which scholars have argued merged feminist anti-pornography arguments with state censorship,<sup>207</sup> reinvigorated lesbian-feminist debates in *LesbiaNews*. The

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<sup>202</sup> Florence Brown, “Language of Love,” *LesbiaNews*, April 1990, 3.

<sup>203</sup> Nancy Isсенmen, “Controversy, Sexuality and Censorship,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1990, 7.

<sup>204</sup> Nancy Isсенmen, “Controversy, Sexuality and Censorship,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1990, 7.

<sup>205</sup> Ann O’Nymous, “Women and Men, Good and Evil,” *LesbiaNews*, November 1990, 3.

<sup>206</sup> Ann O’Nymous, “Women and Men, Good and Evil,” *LesbiaNews*, November 1990, 3.

<sup>207</sup> Cossman, Bell, Gotell, and Ross, *Bad Attitudes on Trial*, 7.

increase of gay, lesbian, and S/M censorship in Canada had immediate legal and political implications for those involved with *LesbiaNews*. Victoria's neighbouring gay and lesbian bookstore in Vancouver, Little Sister's, was involved in a legal battle over the seizure of queer materials by Canadian Customs.<sup>208</sup> In February of 1994, Victoria's SWAG planned an event to celebrate international lesbian week and to protest the censorship of the seizure of gay and lesbian erotic material.<sup>209</sup> The event featured readings of passages from local and famous writers, with the funds going to support Little Sister's legal costs.

However, the event did not take place without controversy. During one of the readings, *LesbiaNews* reported that twenty women chose to get up and leave in protest because they considered the content too explicit.<sup>210</sup> Debby Yaffe, one of the readers at the event, later received an anonymous letter that criticized her position. The letter writer argued that any "material that eroticizes violence is dangerous whoever creates it and whoever the character, whatever the sexual orientation."<sup>211</sup> Yaffe responded publicly through *LesbiaNews* and argued that she was "not going to enter a futile debate about 'good' erotica against 'bad' porn."<sup>212</sup> And that "feminist censorship can mirror state censorship" if it is done carelessly.<sup>213</sup> Yaffe's response encouraged readers to consider what purpose a debate about categorizing erotic content would serve for liberation.

Editor Barbara McLauchlin similarly criticized Canada's recent anti-pornography laws. She wrote, "Canada's ill-conceived and hasty pornography law was enacted ahead of the issues of homosexuality and our rights."<sup>214</sup> She asked lesbian readers to confront the source of their

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<sup>208</sup> Aerlyn Weissman, Cari Green, and production company Homeboys Productions, *Little Sister's vs. Big Brother*, (Moving Images Distribution, 2003).

<sup>209</sup> "International Lesbian Week Forbidden Fruit," *LesbiaNews*, February 1994, 3.

<sup>210</sup> Barbara McLauchlin, "Women on Women – Too Hot for Customs," April 1994, 9.

<sup>211</sup> Anonymous Letter, "Dear LesbiaNews," *LesbiaNews*, April 1994, 5.

<sup>212</sup> Debby Yaffe, "Dear LesbiaNews," *LesbiaNews*, April 1994, 5.

<sup>213</sup> Debby Yaffe, "Dear LesbiaNews," *LesbiaNews*, April 1994, 5.

<sup>214</sup> Barbara McLauchlin, "Editorial," *LesbiaNews*, March 1994, 2.

biases towards pornography, and especially towards lesbian S/M, because to censor all pornographic materials in the name of feminism would “harm the whole lesbian population.”<sup>215</sup> Yaffe and McLauchlin’s arguments mirror the sex-positive and anti-censorship stance stated by Joan Nestle in *A Restricted Country*.<sup>216</sup> The walk-out of twenty women at the anti-censorship event in February, the use of non-explicit language, and even an advertisement for an anti-pornography support group<sup>217</sup> show that Yaffe and McLauchlin’s views were not held by the entire Victoria lesbian community. Nonetheless, the newsletter provided a forum for differing positions.

Perhaps the most controversial debate to happen within the pages of *LesbiaNews* was the 1994 publication of the S/M erotic short story “The Heat of the Island Sun,” written by Connie Hunt.<sup>218</sup> The story was set in a beach campsite and involved two women engaging in nipple play, light bondage, belt spanking, and dom/ sub roles. Interestingly, the newsletter chose not to censor the story but instead, included a warning label. It read, “Warning! This story contains S/M imagery which may not be suitable for some readers.”<sup>219</sup> The story’s content, its warning label, and the very inclusion of the story in the newsletter all sparked passionate responses, encouraging conversation between anti-pornography feminists and pro-S/M or sex-positive lesbians. Readers wrote in to critique or defend the story and what it represented politically. Contributor Margot K. Louis was disturbed by the story’s play with power hierarchy in S/M practices and compared them to patriarchy. She argued that the story should not have been included at all and asked “the editors of *LesbiaNews* to be more discriminating about what gets included in our community newsletter. I appreciate the ‘warning’ at the beginning of the piece,

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<sup>215</sup> Barbara McLauchlin, “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1994, 2.

<sup>216</sup> Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 116.

<sup>217</sup> “Anti-Pornography Dyke Survivor,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1994, 20.

<sup>218</sup> Connie Hunt, “The Heat of the Island Sun,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1994, 10-12.

<sup>219</sup> Editors, “The Heat of the Island Sun,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1994, 10.

but the warning is inadequate, and shows a failure to understand the essential irresponsibility enshrined and celebrated in the story.”<sup>220</sup> For Louis, “there is no difference between this [lesbian erotic story] and patriarchal S/M.”<sup>221</sup> Her anti-pornography and anti-S/M arguments echo feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, who saw all forms of pornography or power-play sex, such as S/M, as patriarchal.<sup>222</sup> These arguments obscured the censorial targeting of lesbian S/M pornography and the conflation of lesbian materials with ‘obscenity’ as a tool of enforcing heteronormativity.<sup>223</sup>

In the next issue, the author of the erotica, Connie Hunt, came to her own defence. She explained that this was her first short story and that she forgot to explicitly write in enthusiastic verbal consent between the characters. She argued that a S/M fantasy does not need to be written in a politically correct way to determine if the sexual act is “appropriate for other people.”<sup>224</sup> She also added that if other readers did not enjoy the story, they should have heeded the warning provided and skipped reading it. Contributor Dawn Heiden defended “The Heat of the Island Sun” by stating that the story was fictional and consent was implied because the author knew what she wanted. She furthermore asserted that “there is no such thing as really hot politically correct literature.”<sup>225</sup> The next contributor to share their opinion, Judith Quinlan, wrote that to negatively judge S/M would be the same as judging socially vulnerable sexual experiences like lesbianism or prostitution.<sup>226</sup> She asked readers to collectively “examine our expectations of

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<sup>220</sup> Margot K Louis, “The Thirteenth Opinion: Dear *LesbiaNews*,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1994, 4.

<sup>221</sup> Margot K Louis, “Dear *LesbiaNews*,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1994, 4.

<sup>222</sup> Andrew Altman, “The MacKinnon-Dworkin Ordinance,” in *Debating Pornography* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 4-5. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199358700.003.0005>.

<sup>223</sup> Strub, “Lavender, Menaced,” 87-88.

<sup>224</sup> Connie Hunt, “The Thirteenth Opinion: Lesbian S/M...,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1994, 4.

<sup>225</sup> Dawn Heiden, “The Thirteenth Opinion: Debate continued,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1994, 4-5.

<sup>226</sup> Judith Quinlan, “The Thirteenth Opinion: Lesbian S/M ... The Beat Goes On ...” *LesbiaNews*, November 1994, 4.

erotic literature.”<sup>227</sup> Quinlan also suggested that other readers did not understand S/M<sup>228</sup> and recommended the book *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*.<sup>229</sup> Similarly, editor Karey Perks cited JoAnn Loulan’s *The Lesbian Erotic Dance*<sup>230</sup> in order to make her point that yes, S/M is political, but discrimination against other types of sexual variation is akin to a reproduction of homophobia.<sup>231</sup> These book recommendations also further demonstrate how readers and editors of *LesbiaNews* were situated within and informed by feminist literature. Contributors’ responses to “The Heat of the Island Sun” in *LesbiaNews* shows how the lesbian Victoria community was embedded in the sex wars debates.

Furthermore, the newsletter contended with questions of public nudity which reflected broader tensions about respectability politics. For some members of the community, nudity represented bodily freedom and resistance to heteronormative standards. For others, it risked reinforcing negative stereotypes about lesbians and jeopardizing public acceptance. While the 1990s saw an increase in lesbian representation that was relatively positive, scholar Ciasullo noted that “visibility means not only that one is *present* but that one is *being watched*.”<sup>232</sup> Debates about sacrificing authentic visibility for respectability and its legal implications were apparent in the responses to Pat and Lee’s women-only Salt Spring Island camping trip.<sup>233</sup> This camping trip had been organized annually for a few years previously, but disagreements arose between the 113 women and children camped there in July of 1994. The organizers, Pat and Lee, received complaints about noise, alcohol, and public nudity from some women in the group. An

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<sup>227</sup> Quinlan, “The Thirteenth Opinion: Lesbian S/M,” 4.

<sup>228</sup> Quinlan, “The Thirteenth Opinion: Lesbian S/M,” 4.

<sup>229</sup> SAMOIS, *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1987).

<sup>230</sup> JoAnn Loulan, and Sherry Thomas, *The Lesbian Erotic Dance: Butch, Femme, Androgyny, and Other Rhythms*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Co., 1990), 145.

<sup>231</sup> Karey Perks, “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1994, 2.

<sup>232</sup> Ciasullo, “Making Her (In)Visible,” 584.

<sup>233</sup> Lee and Pat, “Dear Camper,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1994, 4.

RCMP officer witness lodged a formal complaint against the entire camping group because of the deliberate nudity of a few individuals.<sup>234</sup> After the trip, Pat and Lee wrote to the newsletter to indicate that there would not be an open invite the following summer since the drinking and nudity by some reflected badly on all the other lesbians present.

In the months that followed, many readers wrote letters to the editor to express their opinions. Editor Karey Perks argued that the laws against public nudity were “stupid,” but agreed that by breaking them during a women-only gathering, they endangered respect for and the public perception of all lesbians.<sup>235</sup> Those who engaged in public nudity on Salt Spring defended themselves in the next issue. Dawn Heiden explained that she took her top off simply because she wanted to and that she would not wait for others to feel comfortable first. She called herself an “uppity dyke with little investment in maintaining the social mores of our society.”<sup>236</sup> She also argued that the invite-only format for the trips going forward was a “typical misuse of middle-class power and privilege.” Heiden’s statements suggested that adherence to middle-class values was restraining the entire group from harmless fun. Similarly, Lahl Sardyke identified herself as “the dyke that went too far. At least for some of us.”<sup>237</sup> She noticed that she received less pushback when she had been topless at a tea party, at a comedy night, or in front of the B.C. Legislature buildings.<sup>238</sup> In the next month’s issue, Reva Hutkin and Liz G wrote in to defend Pat and Lee. They emphasized that it was easy to blame the organizers, because while they did not set the rules of the campground, they enforced the rules of the venue. Hutkin and Liz G also argued that the annual camping trip would not exist without Pat and Lee’s work and effort. If women wanted to camp in the nude, they should go elsewhere.<sup>239</sup> The question of public nudity

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<sup>234</sup> Lee and Pat, “Dear Camper,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1994, 4.

<sup>235</sup> Karey Perks, “Editor Comment,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1994, 4.

<sup>236</sup> Dawn Heiden, “Dear LesbiaNews Readers,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1994, 12.

<sup>237</sup> Lahl Sardyke, “Letter to the Editor,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1994, 12.

<sup>238</sup> Lahl Sardyke, “Letter to the Editor,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1994, 12.

<sup>239</sup> Reva Hutkin and Liz G., “Campout,” *LesbiaNews*, November 1994, 4.

reflected internal debates about respectability as lesbians were gaining more visibility in the mainstream.<sup>240</sup>

The conversation about the political role of public nudity continued in an article about the visibility of the “Dykes on Bikes” in the 1995 Victoria Pride Parade.<sup>241</sup> Contributor Connie Hunt questioned the choice of some riders to be “bare-breasted” during the parade.<sup>242</sup> She questioned whether nudity would bring positive visibility or not.<sup>243</sup> Hunt’s hesitancy to accept public nudity perhaps connects to concerns about the actions impacting the lesbian community’s acceptance by heterosexual society.<sup>244</sup> Sue Ondre wrote in to explain that for her, public nudity was part of her experimentation with “gender fucking.” When asked why she took her shirt off, she replied, “why not?”<sup>245</sup>

An increased focus on lesbian identity and the lesbian and gay rights movement, rather than the women’s movement, also developed over the years. In October of 1991, the entire month’s issue was devoted to sharing coming-out stories. *LesbiaNews* also featured a recurring column called “shOut about it” where contributors shared their coming-out stories with other readers. Editor Karey Perks wrote that “sharing our [coming out] stories in print is also a coming-out.”<sup>246</sup> Perks contended that coming out in one’s real life, to family or at work, was just as important as sharing one’s coming out story with fellow lesbians in the community. The newsletter shifted from promoting the International Women’s Day marches to giving more promotional space to the Victoria Pride Parade by 1994.<sup>247</sup> The hyper invisibility of lesbian self-representation in society was simultaneously at odds with commodified, selective

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<sup>240</sup> Barbara McLaughlin, “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1995, 2.

<sup>241</sup> Connie Hunt, “Dear LesbiaNews,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1995, 4.

<sup>242</sup> Connie Hunt, “Dear LesbiaNews,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1995, 4.

<sup>243</sup> Connie Hunt, “Dear LesbiaNews,” *LesbiaNews*, September 1995, 4.

<sup>244</sup> Kinsman, “The Emergence of the Neoliberal Queer,” 289.

<sup>245</sup> Sue Ondre, “So, Shirt You, Gal!” *LesbiaNews*, September 1995, 10.

<sup>246</sup> Karey Perks, “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1991, 2.

<sup>247</sup> Zorya Alexandra Plaskin, “I Yam What I Yam Victoria Pride ‘94,” *LesbiaNews*, June 1994, 1.

representations of lesbians coming from heterosexual media. This meant that the emphasis on having the courage to come out authentically was highly politicized and encouraged.<sup>248</sup>

However, being an out lesbian increased the risk of discrimination.<sup>249</sup> In response to homophobic housing discrimination, the classifieds section of each newsletter provided a forum for lesbians to find safe housing with one another.<sup>250</sup> Readers listed places for rent, looked for housemates, and searched for a home.<sup>251</sup> Explicit violence against lesbians in Victoria was also documented in *LesbiaNews*. “On April 28, 1995, at approximately 1:30 in the morning, a white male, age 19, walked into Rumors (a Gay and Lesbian bar in Victoria), and stabbed a 20-year-old woman of colour who was dancing with another woman.”<sup>252</sup> The woman’s name was Jody Hallwachs. As Lahl Sardyke explained, “the world can be a frightening place. If you are a woman, of colour and lesbian, it is even more frightening.”<sup>253</sup> The article further reported that the lesbian community rallied together to appear at the perpetrator’s trial to support Hallwachs.<sup>254</sup> This attack demonstrated the very real presence of homophobic and racist violence in Victoria. It is an example of collective solidarity being strengthened through adversity.

Lesbian-feminist standards and expectations for lesbian identity were steadily discussed within *LesbiaNews*. Internal stereotypes and political ideologies could also be intertwined with contributors’ sense of community. Editors Debby Yaffe and Kelevelyn Hurley questioned “to what extent can we escape internalized homophobia and misogyny” when lesbians are deeply

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<sup>248</sup> Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 4.

<sup>249</sup> Brouwer, “The Precarious Visibility Politics of Self-Stigmatization,” 118.

<sup>250</sup> “Notices and Ads,” *LesbiaNews*, December 1990, 11.

<sup>251</sup> “Classified Ads,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1995, 16.

<sup>252</sup> Lahl Sardyke, “One Dyke and a Telephone Can Make a Difference,” *LesbiaNews*, June 1995, 3.

<sup>253</sup> Lahl Sardyke, “One Dyke and a Telephone Can Make a Difference,” *LesbiaNews*, June 1995, 3.

<sup>254</sup> Lahl Sardyke, “One Dyke and a Telephone Can Make a Difference,” *LesbiaNews*, June 1995, 3.

informed by the dominant culture.<sup>255</sup> Writing into the semi-recurring advice column “Dear Gertrude,” an anonymous writer felt conflicted about the transition from a self-proclaimed radical to a “homebody lesbian.”<sup>256</sup> She observed that political action had become so intertwined with her identity as a lesbian that she questioned whether her sexuality was radical enough in a heteronormative society. The advice columnist disagreed that simply being a lesbian made one inherently radical and suggested that the letter writer make an effort to continue making political change in the world. Other contributors also pushed back against the internalized set of standards and stereotypes that came with accepting a lesbian identity. Sandy Fika wrote that being with women was not easy, but that she had decided she was “not responsible for anyone else’s stereotypes – straight or lesbian!”<sup>257</sup> Another anonymous contributor suggested an imaginary “lesbo police” who tried to “keep lesbians and like-minded people on the ‘straight’ and narrow, politically-correct path.”<sup>258</sup> Moreover, they suggested a dyke license with a fake exam that would ask questions such as: Are you a female? Are you vegan? If not, then why? Do you have a cat? Do you prefer women in sex? Etc.<sup>259</sup> Policing sexual identity of personal traits showed a distrust of high sets of internal standards within the lesbian-feminist community. Lesbians were not only contending with external homophobic standards but also with internalized assumptions.<sup>260</sup>

The inclusion or exclusion of butch/femme lesbians, of heterosexual allies, bisexuals, and transgender women into the lesbian community was also discussed by contributors. In an opening editorial article, Karey Perks stated that coming of age in the anti-butch/femme era led

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<sup>255</sup> Debby Yaffe and Kelevelyn Hurley, "Another Perspective on Identity and Community Inspired by the Open Letter in the May Issue," *LesbiaNews*, June 1990, 2.

<sup>256</sup> "Dear Gertrude," *LesbiaNews*, June 1990, 4.

<sup>257</sup> Sandy Fika, "shOut About it - She Knew it Wouldn't Be Easy," *LesbiaNews*, November 1993, 3.

<sup>258</sup> "Long Distance Romance – A Dyke License – Lesbo Police Beware," *LesbiaNews*, December/ January 1993/ 1994, 8.

<sup>259</sup> "Long Distance Romance – A Dyke License – Lesbo Police Beware," *LesbiaNews*, December/ January 1993/ 1994, 9.

<sup>260</sup> Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible," 578.

to jokes that “the last thing we need is another lesbian ten commandments.”<sup>261</sup> Similarly, contributor Jacqueline B. in *LesbiaNews* observed about lesbian-feminist communities, “Women must make it to the Isle of Lesbos before the community will accept them - *no hets or bisexuals allowed!*”<sup>262</sup> This was written in reference to her experience coming out and the pressures of “closed mindedness of the lesbian community” in relation to her fluid sexual identity and presentation.<sup>263</sup> Another contributor named Emma Joy Crone mentioned having a 15-minute discussion about “whether trans-sexuals should or should not belong to Lesbian coming out groups!”<sup>264</sup> Similar to Jacqueline B.’s experience of sexual variations, Crone identified apprehension from lesbian-feminist circles about variation in gender presentation.

The debates within *LesbiaNews* demonstrated national and continent-wide feminist conflicts over pornography, S/M, and censorship that were situated through the everyday experience of the Victoria local community. Rather than abstract theoretical disputes, debates about sexuality emerged through conflicts over camping trips, literary submissions, Pride visibility, and community events.

## **Historical Consciousness**

*LesbiaNews* was a part of a larger movement to create and record lesbian stories. This is evidenced by the newsletter invitation to be archived in the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives in Toronto.<sup>265</sup> *LesbiaNews* was also documented in the Women’s Movement archive at the University of Victoria.<sup>266</sup> There was a clear understanding of the historical significance that was being produced by all those involved in *LesbiaNews*. Christine Morissette wrote that lesbians

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<sup>261</sup> Karey Perks, “Editorial,” *LesbiaNews*, June 1994, 2.

<sup>262</sup> Jacqueline B., “shOut about it - Not a Stepford Dyke,” *LesbiaNews*, June 1994, 10.

<sup>263</sup> Jacqueline B., “shOut about it - Not a Stepford Dyke,” *LesbiaNews*, June 1994, 10.

<sup>264</sup> Emma Joy Crone, “The Thirteenth Opinion,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1996, 4.

<sup>265</sup> “Nor Did We Know About You,” *LesbiaNews*, April 1995, 8.

<sup>266</sup> “Weaving the Fabric and Finding the Threads,” *LesbiaNews*, November 1995, 6.

“need to write ourselves into history the same way we have written ourselves into literature.”<sup>267</sup>

The drive to record and preserve a lesbian historical tradition is apparent in the effort to make the newsletter a fixture for the community’s self-documentation. Morissette stated that gays and lesbians have had to learn to be silent to survive state and self-censorship, but must learn how to reclaim the spotlight.<sup>268</sup> Contributor Mary Lane suggested that when lesbian movements are interwoven with women’s liberation and feminist ideologies in history, this process should be referred to as “Her-story.”<sup>269</sup>

The newsletter was shaped by and simultaneously documented the cultural creativity of lesbian life in Victoria. *LesbiaNews* featured lesbian literary works like poetry<sup>270</sup> and short story series, such as Karey Perks’ recurring “Brain Fever.”<sup>271</sup> As well as visual art submissions such as the comics “Portrait of Panic,”<sup>272</sup> “Satchel and Gumm,”<sup>273</sup> or Victoria-specific comic panels.<sup>274</sup> There were performance groups, such as the touring lesbian musician Ferron,<sup>275</sup> the gay and lesbian choir group Musaïc,<sup>276</sup> and the Victoria-based Lesbian Art Collective.<sup>277</sup> The newsletter also promoted in-person entertainment events, such as the Dykonography art show,<sup>278</sup> Dyke Cabaret and Lesbian Tango performances,<sup>279</sup> “Lesbiantics” variety shows,<sup>280</sup> and the annual GALA lesbian dinner and dance.<sup>281</sup> Whereas Hot Flashes coffee house,<sup>282</sup> Women’s Night at

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<sup>267</sup> Christine Morissette, “Lesbians and History,” *LesbiaNews*, November 1990, 6.

<sup>268</sup> Christine Morissette, “Lesbians and History,” *LesbiaNews*, November 1990, 6.

<sup>269</sup> Mary Lane, “Herstory and History,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1991, 3.

<sup>270</sup> Becky BIRTHA, “The Forbidden Poems,” *LesbiaNews*, April 1991, 9.

<sup>271</sup> Karey Perks, “Brain Fever,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1992, 3.

<sup>272</sup> “Portrait of Panic #?,” *LesbiaNews*, January 1991, 5.

<sup>273</sup> Sonic, “Satchel and Gumm,” *LesbiaNews*, July 1994, 7.

<sup>274</sup> O. Copienow, “Women’s Night At Rumors ... During the Commonwealth Games,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1994, 8.

<sup>275</sup> “Ferron,” *LesbiaNews*, February 1992, 9.

<sup>276</sup> Jennifer Waelti-Walters, “Love a Singer,” *LesbiaNews*, April 1995, 5.

<sup>277</sup> Barbara McLaughlin, “Lesbian Art Show Opens,” *LesbiaNews*, February 1996, 1.

<sup>278</sup> Barbara McLaughlin, “Dykonography Makes Its Statement,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1996, 1.

<sup>279</sup> Mary Lasovich, “Review by Mary Lasovich (of Focus on Women Cabaret),” *LesbiaNews*, March 1996, 3.

<sup>280</sup> “Lesbiantics,” *LesbiaNews*, July/ August 1993, 3.

<sup>281</sup> “Letters,” *LesbiaNews*, February 1992, 2.

<sup>282</sup> Sharon W., “Hot Flashes Coffee House,” *LesbiaNews*, April 1991, 3-4.

Rumors,<sup>283</sup> and various hobby clubs were recurring social events listed in the last few pages of each edition in a calendar or directory.<sup>284</sup>

Members of the Victoria lesbian community also recorded each other's stories through the newsletter. Reva Hutkin provided one such example as she was encouraged to write “a short herstory of the dyke movement in Victoria ... [to] share these stories with the readers of *LesbiaNews*.”<sup>285</sup> Hutkin shared her experience with creating a lesbian network of support and later mentioned two previous efforts at lesbian/ women’s newsletters in Victoria, *WAVES*<sup>286</sup> and *FLAGRANT*.<sup>287</sup> Another contributor, Bev Wright, encouraged all lesbian readers to recognize the historical value of their lives and suggested that they become photo-historians to document it.<sup>288</sup> Wright told readers not to dispose of photos because “when we do this, we are not eliminating the past - we are ignoring it, dishonouring it, and refusing to look at it carefully enough to discern the learnings it has given us.”<sup>289</sup> She encouraged the *LesbiaNews* readership to buy photo albums for their memories and write details of the photo to preserve women’s history. The importance of preserving memories, photos, and stories shows a historical consciousness from those involved in the Victoria lesbian community. A poem by Carolyn Cutler titled “In The Lesbian Nursing Home” from 1991 imagined a future where younger women will “beg to look at our newspaper clippings, old slides and photograph albums.”<sup>290</sup> The work of this thesis reflects the imagined younger lesbians who searched through the lives of these women. They have

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<sup>283</sup> “Ads and Notices,” *LesbiaNews*, November 1992, 11.

<sup>284</sup> Example in “Announcements, Ads and Notices,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1996, 16.

<sup>285</sup> Reva Hutkin, “Waltzing Down Memory Lane With Reva,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1990, 2.

<sup>286</sup> Reva Hutkin, “Waltzing Down Memory Lane With Reva,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1990, 3.

<sup>287</sup> Reva Hutkin, “Waltzing Down Memory Lane With Reva Continued From Last Month,” *LesbiaNews*, April 1990, 6.

<sup>288</sup> Bev Wright, “Make Your Own History,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1995, 3.

<sup>289</sup> Bev Wright, “Make Your Own History,” *LesbiaNews*, October 1995, 3.

<sup>290</sup> Carolyn Cutler, “In the Lesbian Nursing Home- OUT/LOOK 1991,” *LesbiaNews*, March 1992, 5.

worked hard to record and share their lives. It is an honour to research and explore such a bounty of material.

## **Conclusion**

*LesbiaNews* demonstrates that a forum encouraging generative debates enabled the consultation of diverse viewpoints and that it was a site of community. The newsletter functioned as both a reflection of and a forum for local lesbians. This thesis suggests that *LesbiaNews* contributors understood themselves as part of a broader Canadian and American feminist and lesbian print literature intellectual tradition. Contributors reviewed and debated thinkers and cultural works, while simultaneously constructing feminist politics and lesbian community through their own writing. The newsletter also challenged racism and classism within Victoria's predominantly white, middle-class population. Classism and poverty were discussed, with themed issues addressing financial inequality and misconceptions about poverty. Contributors acknowledged "shade racism" and tokenism, and promoted anti-racism workshops.

Additionally, opinions about lesbian-feminism appeared throughout. Contributors critiqued separatist lesbian-feminist views on the exclusion of bisexuals, heterosexual allies, and of transgender women. Debates about the construction of lesbian identity questioned internal "lesbo police," straight and lesbian stereotypes, and butch/femme roles. Internal discussions intensified around sexuality. For example, conversations about public nudity during a women-only camping trip, Pride visibility, S/M practices, and erotic literature reflected broader lesbian-feminist and sex wars debates. Connie Hunt's 1994 S/M short story, "The Heat of the Island Sun," sparked passionate responses, encouraging conversation between anti-pornography feminists and pro-S/M or sex-positive lesbians. The anti-censorship event organized in 1994 to

protest the seizure of queer erotic materials by Canada Customs also caused mixed reactions. These debates situate Victoria's local conflicts within continent-wide censorship battles and feminist debates. Considering the fact that sexual orientation was not added to the equality provision of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms until 1996, coming-out stories and visibility were emphasized. Violent incidents, such as the stabbing of Jody Hallwachs in Rumors bar in 1995, underscored the reality of homophobic and racist danger, further solidifying community solidarity.

In particular, contributors were deeply devoted to understanding what community meant to them. Various accounts described the lesbian community in Victoria as "elusive" or "amorphous," "friends who only have sexual preference in common," a "process as well as place," "responsible to personal growth and change," and a "coming together of diverse personalities." Despite their diverse opinions, all contributors participated in the newsletter's collective dialogue. Subgroups such as social clubs were often framed not as fractures but as "communities within the community." By providing a space for debate about the community, the newsletter helped create it. To the benefit of historians, the newsletter also documented the cultural creativity of lesbian life in Victoria. *LesbiaNews* featured poetry, comics, local music, art collectives, dances, and performances.

Ultimately, through its editorials, letters to the editor, classifieds, and cultural coverage, *LesbiaNews* reveals that lesbians in Victoria simultaneously negotiated and produced community during a period shaped by lesbian-feminism, the sex wars, censorship debates, and increasing queer visibility.

## **Appendix**

### ***LesbiaNews* Editors by Year**

Debby Yaffe: September 1989–September 1991

Joan Garcia: September 1991–October 1993

Karey Perks: October 1993–September 1995

Zorya Alexandra Plaskin: October 1993–December 1996

Barbara McLauchlin: October 1993–January 1997

Shelagh Plunkett: September 1994–December 1996

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