

Liz Millward

Making a Scene

Lesbians and Community
across Canada, 1964-84

Sexuality Studies Series

This series focuses on original, provocative, scholarly research examining from a range of perspectives the complexity of human sexual practice, identity, community, and desire. Books in the series explore how sexuality interacts with other aspects of society, such as law, education, feminism, racial diversity, the family, policing, sport, government, religion, mass media, medicine, and employment. The series provides a broad public venue for nurturing debate, cultivating talent, and expanding knowledge of human sexual expression, past and present.

Other volumes in the series are:

Masculinities without Men? Female Masculinity in Twentieth-Century Fictions,

by Jean Bobby Noble

Every Inch a Woman: Phallic Possession, Femininity, and the Text, by Carellin

Brooks

Queer Youth in the Province of the "Severely Normal," by Gloria Filax

The Manly Modern: Masculinity in Postwar Canada, by Christopher Dummitt

Sexing the Teacher: School Sex Scandals and Queer Pedagogies, by Sheila L.

Cavanagh

Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong, by Helen Hok-Sze

Leung

Sapphistries: A Global History of Love between Women, by Leila J. Rupp

The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual Regulation, by Gary

Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile

Awfully Devoted Women: Lesbian Lives in Canada, 1900-65, by Cameron Duder

Judging Homosexuals: A History of Gay Persecution in Quebec and France, by

Patrice Corriveau

Sex Work: Rethinking the Job, Respecting the Workers, by Colette Parent, Chris

Bruckert, Patrice Corriveau, Maria Nengeh Mensah, and Louise Toupin

Selling Sex: Experience, Advocacy, and Research on Sex Work in Canada, edited by

Emily van der Meulen, Elya M. Durisin, and Victoria Love

The Man Who Invented Gender: Engaging the Ideas of John Money, by Terry Goldie

Religion and Sexuality: Diversity and the Limits of Tolerance, edited by Pamela

Dickey Young, Heather Shipley, and Tracy J. Trothen

Fraught Intimacies: Non/Monogamy in the Public Sphere, by Nathan Rambukkana

Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of

Belonging, by Catherine A. Myers and Suzanne Leitch

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

© UBC Press 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Millward, Liz, author

Making a scene : lesbians and community across Canada, 1964-84 / Liz Millward.

(Sexuality studies, 1706-9947)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-3066-9 (bound). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3068-3 (pdf). –

ISBN 978-0-7748-3069-0 (epub)

1. Lesbians – Canada – Social conditions – 20th century. 2. Gay community – Canada – History – 20th century. 3. Gay liberation movement – Canada – History – 20th century. I. Title. II. Series: Sexuality studies series

HQ75.6.C3M54 2015

306.76'63097109045

C2015-903900-2

C2015-903901-0

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

A reasonable attempt has been made to secure permission to reproduce all material used. If there are errors or omissions they are wholly unintentional and the publisher would be grateful to learn of them.

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpress.ca

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

Contents

List of Illustrations / vii

Acknowledgments / ix

Introduction / 3

Part 1: Creating Places / 29

- 1 “The Lesbian, Drinking, Is Never at Her Best”: Beer Parlours, Taverns, and Bars / 43
- 2 “No Drugs, No Straights”: Members-Only Clubs / 76
- 3 “Let’s Decide What We Are – A Drop-In or a Café with Entertainment”: Buildings / 111

Part 2: Overcoming Geography / 151

- 4 “It Was an Incredible Conference”: Getting Together / 169
- 5 “An Event That Is Talked About as Far Away as Toronto”: Claiming Public Space / 200
- 6 “Be Daring – Live the Unbelievable and Challenging Life of a Rural Lesbian!”: Outside the Big City / 232

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

Copyright 2015

Notes / 265

Bibliography / 300

Index / 309

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

Introduction

As a lonely Lesbian of many years it was with great delight that I read your ad in the *Georgia Straight*. I subscribed to the *Ladder* for a couple of years, and anything published by Ann Aldrich or anything pertaining to the so-called “twilight zone.” This, however, is not the same as meeting others of the third sex in a society which either refuses to recognize us or regards us with scorn. Please put me in contact with others who, like myself, desperately need to feel they are not alone.

– Letter dated November 1972 to Zodiac
Friendship Society

The lesbian community is an environment in which women-loving women find freedom and wholeness, as well as sanctuary from a threatening world. [It] functions as an alternative reality to heterosexual society.

– Bonnie Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women:
Lesbian Fiction 1969–1989*

I was entranced by the idea of lesbian nation, which I vaguely envisioned as a world in which lesbianism was the status quo, and heterosexuality was despised. I sort of saw it as my own group of friends writ a few million times larger, with all of us connected to each other.

– Sharon Dale Stone, “Bisexual Women and the ‘Threat’ to Lesbian Space: Or What If All the Lesbians Leave?”

“BEING A LESBIAN” has never been a straightforward task. In the 1960s, rare indeed was the woman who noticed that her erotic desires were for women, cheerfully embraced the word “lesbian,” and briskly set off down the route signposted “lesbian nation.”¹ Far more common was the woman who had been convinced that she ought not to have erotic desires of her own, who knew that “those women” were despised, disgusting, or exotic creatures, or who, should she have begun in her marriage to feel an unbearable need to meet women who shared her feelings, had absolutely no idea how to find them.

This book is about the process by which women in Canada began to subvert that second, more common, story by “making a scene.” The phrase implies bringing attention to oneself, causing a spectacle, but it has another meaning: in lesbian and gay parlance the “scene” is the place where lesbians and gay men go to find each other and discover themselves. Although it is typically considered more commercial than community based, the term does cover a range of venues from bars and clubs to support groups.² Each of these by now quite standard components of the “scene” originally had to be imagined, created from scratch, and then sustained. In Canada over a twenty-odd-year period starting in the 1960s, women made a scene for themselves. They produced a large number of physical sites, such as lesbian and gay centres, lesbian drop-ins at women’s centres, lesbian rap groups, bookstores, bars, cafés, and private members’ clubs. They travelled around the country to meet each other, to visit various lesbian locations, and to attend lesbian events such as conferences, workshops, festivals, music events, and fundraisers. They also drew attention to themselves, challenging lesbians’ chronic invisibility. They dreamt that these actions would build an enduring lesbian political and cultural scene. And they were mostly *young*, a new generation of women burning with passion, anger, and the desire for

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

a new future. These were baby boomers, part of the enormously influential generation born between 1946 and 1964.³

The efforts by Canadian lesbians to “make a scene” mattered because spatial struggles are social struggles. As Henri Lefebvre suggests, “any ‘social existence’ aspiring or claiming to be ‘real,’ but failing to produce its own space, would be a strange entity, a very peculiar kind of abstraction, unable to escape from the ideological or even the ‘cultural’ realm.”⁴ By the 1960s, Canadian lesbians could already situate themselves in a transnational cultural realm, an “imagined community” of lesbians.⁵ This was in part thanks to the bravery of previous generations of women, some of whom had found publishers for their writing about lesbians, or whose lives were described in *The Ladder*, the publication of the US-based Daughters of Bilitis, as well as to novels from England, the United States, and France that had been circulating in Canada for several years, such as *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, *Spring Fire* by Vin Packer (one of the pseudonyms, along with Ann Aldrich, of Marijane Meaker), and *Le Pur et l’Impur* by Colette. For example, recalling her first sexual encounter with a woman during the Second World War, “Charlotte” explained, “I had read *The Well of Loneliness* and I thought ‘Oh dear, I’m not that horsey type.’ But there was something so terribly attractive about *The Well of Loneliness* that I thought, ‘Can this be wrong?’”⁶

Women working in the war industries had also begun to create semi-public places to meet. Toronto’s Chinatown, for example, was “the centre of activity for girls newly-released from the services, girls from farms and small towns, girls who had heard vague rumours that in Toronto there was a place to go where you could be with your own kind.”⁷ However, although the exigencies of the Second World War had moved thousands of women around the country and brought them together in settings that fostered a nascent lesbian community, this process was not as extensive nor as permanent in Canada as it was in the United States or Britain. To expand their network beyond the pockets of safety they might have developed with one partner or just a few other women – to make a scene – larger numbers of women needed a way to meet each other in person in order to find potential lovers, friends, and community support. The idea that a woman was a lesbian, in her essential self, was largely meaningless unless she interacted with other women who also defined themselves as lesbians, increasingly in spaces designated, no matter how temporarily, as locations where lesbians could be found. As

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

a writer in one Toronto lesbian newsletter commented in 1975, “Life is really very wonderful, but girls, with some effort on our part, this same life can be just as wonderful for others. Only someone who has experienced such terrible loneliness [*sic*] and despair can really appreciate the need of offered friendship – a helping hand when it is needed. It’s time. Let’s give a damn!!”⁸

In their ground-breaking study of the working-class lesbian bar culture of Buffalo, New York, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis argue that “community is key to the development of twentieth-century lesbian identity and consciousness,”⁹ but achieving this sense of community was no easy task. The Zodiac Friendship Society, based in Saskatoon, remarked in 1973 that “there are still many gay people who do not know how or where to meet other gay people” and that “even though we do advertise weekly in the local papers there are people who write to us surprised to find out that we have been in existence for over a year now.”¹⁰ At the beginning of the 1970s, Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love, who wrote the influential *Sappho Was a Right-on Woman*, suggested that a woman who had not yet encountered any form of lesbian community “has probably led a solitary life and, in any case, does not know how to behave as a Lesbian . . . It is safer to hide behind a stereotype and not let other Lesbians, who appear threatening as well as attractive, get too close to her.”¹¹ However, as Micheline Grimard-Leduc wrote in 1982, “as soon as I *share* my dream with another lesbian, I start breaking through the alien circle. This single act of communication materializes the dream. By this exchange we build reality,” and in 1984, the editors of the *Stepping Out of Line* lesbian workbook asserted that “contact with other lesbians [is] crucial to our survival.”¹² Thus the spaces women produced in order to make contact with each other were pivotal to the creation of lesbian subjectivity, a sense of interconnectedness, what Bonnie Zimmerman called an “alternative reality to heterosexual society.”¹³ The subsequent impact of a more extensive and visible scene could be dramatic. “Do you notice any difference in today’s younger gay people?” Marion Foster and Kent Murray asked an older woman for their 1972 study of Canadian gay life. “Yes, oh yes,” she replied. “It’s wonderful. They have a very free and lovely attitude. The young gay women that I have met are delightfully outgoing. They’re not one bit interested in just living with their own mate. Or staying in their own little circle.”¹⁴ The more women broke out of “their own little circle” or broke “through the alien circle” and connected to other women, the more rapidly the scene grew and diversified and opened up new ways of living and loving.

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

Laughable, Criminal, or Sick

Women had their work cut out in their attempts to make a scene. They existed in the context of an overwhelming, but certainly not monolithic, heteronormativity that was reinforced in all its subtle variations every single day, at work, in the home, at school, in religious organizations, in stores, at the movies, on radio and television, in the newspapers, and in the design of space, such as that in the suburban home. The ideology of heteronormativity, with its foundational tenets linking masculine superiority and feminine inferiority, was strengthened by relentlessly defining all alternatives to it as laughable, criminal, sick, or a foreign vice. As Judith remarked in 1973 in the Lesbian Issue of *The Other Woman*, Canada's feminist publication, she thought that "lesbians were creatures that lived in New York and did strange and exotic things to each other."¹⁵

Although heteronormativity, in all its guises, was powerful, from the late 1950s to the mid-1980s old certainties were up for debate, and across the globe it seemed that power relations between men and women, church and state, colonizers and colonized subjects, parents and children, black and white people, West and East and North and South, were all shifting in extraordinary ways. In postwar North America, popular sociological texts tried to account for and critique these altered social conditions, as well as map out the politics of the new social movements that were pushing for the changes. Influential American examples include *The Power Elite* by C. Wright Mills (1956), David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950, reprinted as a paperback in 1961), Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (1963), and *Black Power* by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton (1967). Canada had *The Vertical Mosaic* by John Porter (1965) and Harold Cardinal's *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada's Indians* (1969).

Lesbians had their own version of this type of book. Early examples from the United States were Ann Aldrich's two books *We Walk Alone* (1955) and *We, Too, Must Love* (1958), which explored the lesbian subcultures of New York. Later books usually first described the oppressive conditions under which lesbians lived and then examined the possibilities offered by combining the insights of Gay Liberation and Women's Liberation. Perhaps the best known are *Sappho Was A Right-On Woman* by Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love (1972), *Lesbian/Woman* (1972) by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon (who were among the founders of the Daughters of Bilitis), and the collection of

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

essays in *Lavender Culture* edited by Karla Jay and Allen Young (1978). *A Not So Gay World* by Marion Foster and Kent Murray (1972) was the Canadian contribution to this style of social commentary. Unlike its US cousins, however, the Canadian book focused more on violence and oppression than on alternatives, for which it was roundly condemned by gay liberationists at the time.¹⁶ This condemnation was unfair. Conditions were indeed harsh, and lavender-tinted spectacles did little to ameliorate them in the short term – although in the longer term, the determination of lesbians to live in the world they saw through those spectacles helped to bring that world about.

There were other printed sources which dealt with lesbianism. The rising influence of psychiatry, and its popularization through pseudo-scientific articles appearing in various anglophone publications, such as *Chatelaine*, gave families and individuals a pathological name for same-sex relationships.¹⁷ These explanations often described lesbians in lurid detail as twisted, perverted, miserable, and dangerous. In 1954, for example, a study of lesbians confidently explained that “lesbianism is a *symptom* and not a disease entity. It is the result of a deep-seated neurosis which involves narcissistic gratifications and sexual immaturity. It also represents a neurotic defense mechanism for feelings of insecurity.”¹⁸ This type of popular psychiatric assessment became widespread – so much so that in 1971, Charlotte Wolff argued that “by now Freudian thought is as firmly established as Darwin’s theory of evolution,”¹⁹ and with it the idea that same-sex desire was a form of psychological immaturity. Even psychiatrists who did not agree with this definition were careful to keep their ideas to themselves.²⁰ Simplified versions of these theories appeared in cheap paperback pocket – or pulp – books that were sold in dime stores, drugstores, and bus stations. The books spread a perception of lesbianism as a form of purely sexual depravity that always ended badly: in death, institutionalization, rape, or marriage. The publishers specialized in advice books and genre fiction: westerns, detective novels, and lesbian fiction that was, essentially, “soft porn written for men.” However, as Lynne Fernie, co-director and writer of the National Film Board documentary *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*, notes, “Women also found them, and read them for their own pleasure – even with the horrible endings.” The books were important “because it was all [women] could find. And whether you read them or not, those books were a primary way in which stereotypes about lesbians, queers, and perverts circulated.”

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

Another widespread discourse about lesbianism linked it to criminality. In Montreal, for example, the yellow or gutter press emphasized this link.²² The link made sense, in part, because the small number of visible lesbians congregated in bars linked to criminal activity, but also because the police harassed lesbians and used various laws to control them, even though the laws were not explicitly directed against them. Fernie points out that “the police would hang around outside the beer parlours and harass women at the end of the night for not having enough money. When I left Vancouver in the sixties, there was a law that if you didn’t have a certain amount of money on you[, you] could be considered an indigent and be arrested. The cops would use laws like this to hassle women because they were lesbian.”²³ In Montreal, too, if women held hands on the street, the police might stop them for vagrancy and put them in jail overnight.²⁴ Furthermore, whether specific anti-lesbian laws existed or not, women modified their behaviour because they believed that they could be disciplined by them. Line Chamberland argues that even though women were ignorant of the precise laws, many were convinced that they could be charged with “incitement to debauchery” and, particularly, “corrupting a minor” if they had a relationship with a woman younger than twenty-one. One of the narrators in her study of lesbians in Montreal in the 1950s and 1960s recalled that even if their sexuality was an open secret, groups of young women who were around twenty years old did not talk openly about their lives.²⁵ Because Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver all had bars frequented by lesbians, harassment in those locations has been well documented, but any lesbian could be targeted.

Lesbians also found themselves threatened with legal prosecution, job loss, and expulsion from educational institutions. They risked religious condemnation. The Catholic Church in particular vilified women’s love for other women, although sometimes it did not define married women’s affairs with other women as adultery. In Quebec, since various Catholic orders ran most of the educational institutions, “the moral requirements were particularly strict and impinged heavily on teachers’ private lives.”²⁶ Teachers needed to appear morally blameless, and any woman whose private life was suspect could not only lose her place but also have no chance of being hired by any other Catholic school. Chamberland remarks that teachers were particularly vulnerable to such charges, which risked both their personal and professional reputations.²⁷ Another career in which lesbians (and gay men) were discriminated against was the military. The Armed Forces

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

routinely discharged them, a practice codified in the Canadian Forces Administrative Order 1976.²⁸ It was in this broad context that women had to overcome the damaging impact of the hegemonic version of lesbianism that confronted them, and many had already married men and had children before they began to call their presumed heterosexuality into question.²⁹

The cost of being lesbian under these conditions could be immense. In 1972, Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love, who visited Canada on a speaking tour later in the decade, listed all the different ways in which women who desired other women tried to deal with this “deviance” from “normality.” Common responses that they identified were guilt, shame, and denial. Some women felt a constraining obligation, so that, provided her lesbianism remained a “guilty secret,” a woman would feel that she was “in society’s debt if she [were] allowed to keep a good job and straight friends.” Alternatively, lesbians might live up to stereotypes by being “irresponsible, promiscuous, tough.”³⁰ Although some women took great pride in their difference, found lovers and community, and lived fulfilled lives, many others struggled. As one Edmonton lesbian remarked, “Fear seems to rule our lives, a fear that is real and compelling and that cannot but curb our efforts or inclinations to BE, let alone be ourselves.”³¹ Reflecting on that time period, Ellen Woodsworth, one of the founders of *The Other Woman*, drew attention to the climate of terror because women “were being hospitalized in mental hospitals for being lesbian, and they were being thrown in jail, they were being beaten up.”³² Unsurprisingly, as a result, many women were isolated, lonely, drunk, drugged, violent, homophobic, self-loathing, exiled, dislocated, repressed, deceitful, pathologized, sent to psychiatrists or committed to mental institutions, fired from their jobs, or denied custody of their children. Women could feel withdrawn, invisible, despairing, and rejected. Some killed themselves.³³ Some were murdered.³⁴ To honour these women, Abbott and Love dedicated their book *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman* “to those who have suffered for their sexual preference, most especially to Sandy, who committed suicide, to Cam, who died of alcoholism, and to Lydia, who was murdered; and to all who are working to create a future for Lesbians.”³⁵

However, as Abbott and Love as well as Martin and Lyon emphasize in their books, all of this misery actually had nothing to do with being a lesbian as such: it is the mark of belonging to an oppressed group.³⁶ Marilyn Frye, an influential lesbian philosopher whose *The Politics of Reality* guided some

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press



Lisa Tremblay reads feminist theory aloud while being paddled down a Yukon river, 1980s.
Photographer: Helen Fallding. *Source:* personal collection of Helen Fallding

lesbians to make sense of oppressive power relations in the 1980s (see adjacent photo), noted that “one of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind – situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation.” The lesbians who made a scene in Canada were trying to shatter and break free of this double bind and of the bonds which were supposed to “Mold. Immobilize. Reduce” them, as Frye put it.³⁷ As Abbott and Love claim, women like these declared “I cannot and will not live any other way, and I cannot live my way the way things are now.”³⁸ Which meant that if the women would not change, the conditions had to: and these women were the ones to do it.

Finding Each Other

The powerful social restraints on lesbians were not the only obstacles they had to overcome in their quest to make a recognizable lesbian scene. Canada is a very large country, comprising 9,976,139 square kilometres (3,851,809 square miles). In the 1966 census year the population was 19.9 million, rising to 25.3 million in the 1986 census year. More than three-quarters of the population lived in what the census defined as urban areas (all cities, towns,

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

and villages with a population of 1,000 or more). These people were mainly concentrated in the areas of southern Ontario and Quebec that had a well-developed infrastructure of railways, sealed roads, and towns with full municipal services. This still left nearly a quarter of the population in rural areas, and in any case, to classify all settlements of 1,000 or more people as urban is not to say that these communities were urbanized. In addition, as the 1965 *Canada Year Book* remarked, “the country extends 4,000 miles from east to west and its main topographic barriers run in a north-south direction, so that sections of the country are cut off from one another.”³⁹ In fact, since north-south travel was less impeded by the lay of the land, several lesbians and gay men developed strong links to the United States rather than to other parts of Canada. Valerie Korinek notes that, in the 1970s, “flights [from Saskatoon] to San Francisco were affordable and easily accessible, and many Saskatoon gays and lesbians who could afford to travel visited San Francisco.”⁴⁰ For those who kept their travel within Canada, given the large distances between destinations, trips were of a fairly long duration, and their costs correspondingly high. These costs could make travel difficult for women. The report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW), published in 1970, documented the disparity between men’s and women’s wages, as well as the low wages women earned in their ghettoized occupations. Lesbians, furthermore, tended to have insecure incomes and therefore had less income than the average woman, herself hardly flush with earnings in those decades before pay equity legislation began its fitful assault on gendered wage disparity. A 1978 survey of women who planned to attend the 1979 Bi-National Lesbian Conference in Toronto indicated that many were students, unemployed, or artists and musicians.⁴¹ A survey of Gay Community Centre of Saskatoon users in 1984 found that the women who responded were all struggling financially.⁴²

The size of the country, the difficulty of travelling across it, and the high cost of transportation relative to income created the “friction of distance,” which refers to the impact of travel time and cost on making connections between places, making the connections difficult and sometimes almost impossible.⁴³ Under these conditions, even though a woman might know that other lesbians existed, physically connecting with them presented a significant hurdle. And besides, for most Canadian women who desired women, there were very few places that held meaning for them collectively as lesbians prior to the 1960s, although for decades individual women had found love and companionship in small networks of similar women. The poet

Elsa Gidlow, for example, found a tiny circle of friends and a lover through her links with a gay man in Montreal between 1914 and 1919.⁴⁴ In the late 1920s there were sensationalized stories of lesbian escapades at private parties recorded in Toronto tabloid journals, which point to “an early moment in the public apprehension of lesbianism.”⁴⁵ Karen Duder suggests that in Ontario, at least, there had been some grudging acceptance when two middle-class white women set up home together prior to the Second World War.⁴⁶ They found each other by carefully reading the signs of difference from heteronormative behaviour rather than by encountering each other in a known lesbian locale. Both Duder and Chamberland detail the class-based networks that existed in Toronto and Montreal prior to the 1960s. Team sports and group visits to bars and hotels were common ways for working-class women to connect, Chamberland suggests, while middle-class women spent “their recreational time ... with their partners and a few selected friends.”⁴⁷ Even after a more public scene had developed, gender could still be a barrier to accessing it. In 1974, lesbians who attended a Gay Alliance Toward Equality (GATE) meeting in Edmonton explained that “lesbians tend to be more closeted than the men (generally speaking) and have a more difficult time in finding out where things are happening.”⁴⁸ To develop the critical mass required for a recognizable lesbian scene that was not restricted to already-existing class-based cliques of lovers and friends, several existing conditions had to change.

Alternative Tales

Above all, women had to produce an alternative way of conceptualizing what the word “lesbian” meant. They needed a counter narrative. Those same pulp pocket books and psychiatric texts that damned lesbians as perverted were important to women who were trying to find evidence that they were not alone in their desires. Some books provided women with the means to proudly situate themselves in the sapphic tradition, and in some cases they gave women a language of noble love rather than merely sexual depravity. This perhaps most often happened in Montreal, where a hint of an alternative perspective could be read into novels such as the Claudine series by Colette, and those by Honoré de Balzac, Charles Baudelaire, Violette Leduc, Pierre Louÿs, and Françoise Mallet-Jorris, all of which circulated in spite of the power of the Catholic Church to condemn certain texts.⁴⁹ But the pulp magazine was also a source of popular texts, which

were important for women's attempts to account for themselves and retain their self-respect. For example, in her 1955 book *We Walk Alone*, Ann Aldrich carefully placed her main argument within the discourse of popular psychiatry, asserting that "the lesbian is the little girl who couldn't grow up," who is trapped by her fear of men and her desire for a substitute mother.⁵⁰ Yet she also provided a more appealing alternative to women who were impatient with this fundamentally male-centred, misogynistic, and reductive story. Rather than accept a psychiatric definition, lesbians could trace their genealogy back to Sappho and the isle of Lesbos (Lesvos). Aldrich explained that even before Sappho, "homosexuality was widely practiced among both men and women, and was not generally regarded as in any way disgraceful." She went on to quote Sappho's poetry and depicted Mytilene, the capital of Lesbos, as a gorgeous utopia "where the eye saw beauty everywhere."⁵¹ Although she tempered her descriptions with suggestions that Freudians could explain sapphic desire (and thereby pathologize and reduce it back down to their limited interpretation), the underlying message of her chapter on Sappho was that Lesbos was a sensual paradise where lesbianism was not just accepted, but an exalted element of the beautiful. Fifteen years later, the British psychologist Charlotte Wolff took up this message in her defence of lesbianism. She also quoted Sappho's poetry, and argued that "hers was a sophisticated love, a love of beauty, grace and charm." This led her to claim that "lesbian feelings have two distinct features: a) their highly aesthetic quality and reverence for beauty, b) their intense emotionality. It is in this latter quality that female homosexuality stands apart from any other form of love, and this has not changed in 2600 years."⁵²

Thus lesbians could claim a particular location, Lesbos, as their imagined homeland. From the beginning of the twentieth century, shortly after surviving fragments of Sappho's poetry had been discovered, "women from Europe and America traveled to Lesvos to pay tribute to Sappho, on the one hand, and, on the other, to look for this mythical place where women might live independently in an atmosphere of love and freedom."⁵³ During the 1970s, the political currents of feminism, as well as women's desire to travel independently, the development of ever cheaper flights on commercial jets, and the growth of tourism, all fuelled and made possible women's interest in seeing Lesbos for themselves, and particularly Skala Eresos, the village where Sappho is reputed to have been born.⁵⁴ Once those paperback pocket books that were accessible in the drugstore made links between present-day Lesbos and ancient Sappho and the lives of Lesbians,

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

lesbians increasingly experienced “time-space distancing,” which is the stretching out of relations across space, facilitated by improvements in the speed of transport and communications.⁵⁵ By placing themselves in a sapphic tradition, lesbians not only mined a rich seam of self-respect but also defined themselves as connected, globally, to a community comprising all others who counted themselves as descended from that tradition. Charlotte Wolff suggested that lesbian love “has a definite profile which is quite different from that of heterosexual love [...] The original flavour of Sapphic love still permeates the imagination of almost all homosexual women with whom I have come into contact.” In the 1970s, Audre Lorde, recognizing the limited appeal of a Western European tradition for black lesbians, reinvigorated another tradition, that of the warrior women of Dahomey, and the myths of lesbian origins took hold of many women’s imaginations.⁵⁶

Reclaiming “lesbian” as a word denoting a once-exalted sapphic love was not the only way women sought to redefine the term. They countered notions of lesbianism that depicted it as an individualized sexual aberration linked in some way to men; that is, the idea of the lesbian as a woman too repulsive to attract men, a woman too damaged by sex with men to trust them, or a woman who wanted to be a man.⁵⁷ Dismissing these male fantasies, which asserted that all women’s sexuality was defined only in relation to men, women discussed among themselves what the term “lesbian” meant. Whether in small friendship circles, across the pool table, on the pages of newsletters, or, by the 1970s, at conferences and in reading and discussion groups, they did not reach consensus over who, exactly, counted as a lesbian. Often – although by no means always – powerfully influenced by the emerging language and ideas of lesbian feminism articulated by both home-grown and US feminists, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s the term came to connote personal and individual as well as collective and political group identity. It could refer to the capacity to love women, to have sex with women, to feel oppression and have a political consciousness of that oppression, to be part of a community of lesbians, to be a woman who did not sleep with men, and/or to be a woman who engaged with women in intimate ways. It could be defined in purely political terms, avoiding the sexual connotations, in an attempt to create a space for closeted women to find each other and for all women (or feminists, at any rate) to recognize their shared experiences of oppression.

In publications, as well, the definitions of “lesbian” proliferated. A “Lesbian is a woman whose primary erotic, psychological, emotional and

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

social interest is in a member of her own sex, even though that interest may not be overtly expressed” according to Martin and Lyon in 1972, and the same year Abbott and Love argued that “Lesbianism is a way of living; with assumptions on the value and meaning of the self; it constitutes a kind of statement of belief in independence and freedom for all females.” The following year, Jill Johnston’s more avant-garde collection of essays, *Lesbian Nation*, was published, in which she records, in her distinctive prose style, the process by which she reached a position of politicized lesbianism. She claimed that “feminism at heart is a massive complaint. Lesbianism is the solution. Which is another way of putting what Ti-Grace Atkinson once described as Feminism being a theory and lesbianism the practice.” Eve Zaremba, writing for a Canadian audience in 1982, broke lesbianism down into different components: feelings, acts, and identity. For Zaremba, lesbianism could be divided into “*lesbian sex*, which is overt sexual activity between women, *being a lesbian* (or living as a lesbian), and finally, *lesbian sexuality*, understood as the more generalized sexual energy and attraction between women, women who may not necessarily be lesbians or have sex together.” Adrienne Rich’s article in *Signs* in 1980, on “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” introduced the idea of the lesbian continuum (somewhere along which any woman could find herself) and sparked a furor at a time when feminist scholarship was being avidly devoured by non-academic lesbians and feminists.⁵⁸

How a woman became lesbian was also indeterminate. Some women had always been lesbian, others had been married or involved with men, and many had children. A set of questions on a survey distributed at the 1979 Bi-National Lesbian Conference in Toronto asked attendees about the route by which they had come out. The respondents clearly interpreted this as a question about how they became lesbian. They were asked if they did this through the women’s movement, through the gay movement, or through the bars. Overall, the answer seemed to be no, they had not become lesbian through these avenues, although these had provided social opportunities. Instead, the women mixed in university circles, or fell in love, and it was through those experiences that they began to see the world in a new way and to actively seek out lesbian community. For example, one twenty-six-year-old woman wrote a lengthy account of what it was like to be a lesbian for the Feminist Lesbian Action Group in Victoria, BC, in 1976. In her account she recorded that she was “completely blown away with sexual relationships with womyn. I had the feelings but I had never experienced, such highs, a

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

complete equal sharing.” This alone was not enough to sustain her: “I could not have survived if I were just a lesbian, and feminism is my key to reality, it has made me aware of my oppression.”⁵⁹ In another example, Cy-Thea Sand, who founded *The Radical Reviewer*, was already aware that there were alternatives to heterosexuality, because her aunt’s best friend was a lesbian:

so I grew up with some lesbian subterranean stuff going on. Some part of me knew about some other reality. But it wasn’t until I met Linda that it blossomed for me, it was like ohhhkayy! The experience of lesbian sex for the first time for me was very political, because I thought: they’re *keeping* this from women? I experienced an understanding beyond political intellectual analysis, about how subjugated knowledge works. Because I thought, oh my Godde! I had been heterosexually active before Linda, but after Linda, I thought, there is no comparison, and why didn’t I know about this sexuality? How is it I didn’t know how that changes and deepens my critical thinking?⁶⁰

Cy-Thea’s experience is a particularly clear example of how having sex with a woman she deeply desired opened up not just a different world of possibilities, but also a complex understanding of how women’s sexuality was contained by heteronormative practices that concealed or misrepresented lesbianism. Even so, once a woman decided that she was interested in “being” a lesbian, she could encounter a sense of a hierarchy over who was entitled to use the term. In an article in *Images: Kootenay Women’s Paper* on coming out, the anonymous author wrote that when she started to meet “real live Lesbians,” she was “in awe. I simply had no idea what they were like, or how I should think, talk or act around them. So I remained very quiet, positioned myself next to any of the Lesbians in a group, and absorbed every word spoken, every movement made.”⁶¹ Newcomers to the scene felt pressure to gain credibility before naming themselves, taking the lead from already-declared lesbians. This applied equally to butch-femme bar culture and to feminists who had at least one foot in hippie culture.

Regardless of the range of meanings that women placed on the term, and on who was entitled to use it, some women argued that lesbians were inherently superior to other women. In feminist circles, this might provoke conflict over who was living their politics by putting their sexual energy into women’s liberation, but there was another way of understanding

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

why lesbians seemed “so terribly attractive.” As Terri wrote in *Club 70 News*, “most of the lesbians I know have studied on after finishing high school and those who haven’t are endowed with something special ... a talent ... an ability ... a savoir-faire which sets them apart from the common crowd.” And Nym, who set up Amazon Acres in Mission, BC, remembered the general sense that “lesbians could do anything.”⁶² That sense endured: in a 2001 study of gay women in small-town Ontario, one woman argued that “gay women are ‘adventurous in spirit’ [and] that their sexuality has prompted the women she knows to ‘do more’ with their lives, including building projects.”⁶³ Lesbians were attractive because they seemed capable and confident.

Changing the meaning of “lesbian” from a word for a woman who was laughable, criminal, or sick into a word for a woman who was attractive, sexually autonomous, and part of a beautiful tradition of women-loving women was something women did for themselves. Other changes that affected women’s ability to make a scene were part of wider shifts emerging from the concerted efforts of many Canadians. The 1960s and 1970s was a period of dramatic upheaval, which saw the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) bombings and kidnappings, and the War Measures Act; the work of the RCSW; challenges to the Indian Act and the growth of Red Power; amendments to the Divorce Act; the introduction of the Official Languages Act and the Omnibus Bill; the rise in university undergraduate places and increases in numbers of women undergraduates; the development of black political consciousness, particularly in Nova Scotia; the diversification of the women’s movement and rise of an international peace movement; the influx of US draft resisters and their wives; and the liberalization of licensing laws, all of which took place against the backdrop of proliferating telecommunications and rapid changes in transportation. The economy boomed and the Liberal government instituted a number of government grant schemes, such as the Opportunities for Youth (OFY) and Local Initiative Programme (LIP), both of which supported various community initiatives. Some of these initiatives took community participation seriously and tried to radicalize democracy. In addition to these national-scale shifts, Quebec quietly underwent its revolution.

Perhaps the most obviously significant of all these changes was the Criminal Law Amendment Act (referred to as the Omnibus Bill or Bill C-150), which was passed in 1969. Most famous for the opportunity it gave

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to declare that “there’s no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation,” the act partially legalized abortion and contraception, and decriminalized homosexual acts between consenting adults in private. This decriminalization applied to men, since only their acts had been criminal offences under existing legislation. For women who desired other women, the act still gave the Crown power to prosecute, under charges of indecency or corruption of a minor. However, many lesbians at the time identified the act primarily as a sign of public recognition of their right to exist. It was immensely important for women because of their belief that it legitimized them. As Foster and Murray pointed out, changes in the lived experiences of lesbians and gay men were “not a direct result of” changes to the Criminal Code. Instead, they were “a spin-off made possible by the psychological climate that followed the adoption of section 158 [of Bill C-150]. Homosexuals are emerging because they feel it is now safe to do so.”⁶⁴ Line Chamberland notes, for example, that the main effect of the law mentioned by lesbians in Montreal was the legitimation of their sexual preferences and a reevaluation of the self.⁶⁵ Although the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and the removal of homosexuality as a disease from the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) in 1973 are considered crucial events by American scholars, Carolyn Anderson’s study of lesbians in Calgary indicates that, in the Canadian context, Bill C-150 was far more important for them. She notes that while only two of her participants knew about Stonewall or the DSM change, “most of the respondents were aware of Prime Minister Trudeau’s role in the decriminalization of homosexuality and indicated that they had gained a small but significant sense of power by voting for him.”⁶⁶ The sense that change was in the air led some women to bond together and refuse to tolerate any longer the harassment and discrimination that had been an everyday element of their lives.

Feminism was another crucial factor supporting women who wanted to make a scene. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the most powerful growth in the Canadian women’s movement since before the First World War. Women organized at every level against the taken-for-granted culture of woman-blaming and the sexual double standard. The RCSW report documented inequities in every area of women’s lives and between different groups of women. Feminists fought for changes in everything from pay scales to reproductive rights. They developed differing feminist perspectives

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

and tried to make it possible for more women to achieve financial independence. In the process, many women gained valuable experience in organizing events, campaigns, and groups, such as Voice of Women or the Abortion Caravan. There was an “almost spontaneous eruption of feminist ideas and questions [...] The progress made during this brief period was nothing short of phenomenal.”⁶⁷ Ellen Woodsworth recalls the marvellous feeling that “it was a time when everything was moving, everything was shifting and the economy was going well, so we really felt like on a queer day you could see forever, we felt like we could change the world and make a better world. It was really good.”⁶⁸ In the “Lesbian Issue” of *The Other Woman*, the collective published a lesbian-feminist statement that articulated just this sentiment. “We as lesbians are beginning to fight for our basic women’s rights and more – our international revolution. We are learning to cut through the fears, games, and lies to find each other ... We as lesbian feminists have our lives joyfully committed to helping each other open up as strong fighting loving women. We have nothing to lose and we have a world to build.”⁶⁹ Although all lesbians were by no means feminists or vice versa, it was true that many feminists were also lesbians, and many lesbians were influenced or affected by feminism. What the women’s movement as a whole did was provide the intellectual tools to analyze women’s subjection and the techniques to organize against it, and it opened up a vast field of possibilities for women.

The other set of significant changes that influenced women’s ability to make a scene came in the realms of transport and communications. Transportation links for many communities became faster with road improvement schemes, such as the Trans-Canada Highway and the 400-network of highways in Ontario, although some places lacked the political clout to be included in these projects and became, in effect, backwaters. The increase in airline travel prompted passenger rail lines and bus companies to become more competitive. The Gestetner copier, the photocopier, and the electric typewriter all sped up and enhanced the ability of groups to communicate. Periodical publications were a key way to connect lesbians across the country, and to keep them updated on what was going on elsewhere, and two national English-language lesbian newsmagazines attempted to do just that: *Long Time Coming*, published out of Montreal from 1973, and *Lesbian/Lesbienne*, which was launched in May 1979 at the Bi-National Lesbian Conference in Toronto, and then struggled to survive through the hard work of women in Kitchener and Guelph. These publications both (optimistically) hoped

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

to reach lesbians everywhere and to deal with stories from all provinces, although both proved to be impossible tasks. Longer-lived and more successful, on the whole, at covering a range of issues with a wider geographical reach (although still sometimes accused of being too parochial) were feminist publications that were run mostly by lesbians, such as *The Other Woman* from Toronto, *Radical Reviewer* from Vancouver, and *Amazones d'hier, lesbiennes d'aujourd'hui* from Montreal. All of these dealt with lesbian feminist politics and literature, although the first two encompassed a range of heterosexual feminist issues as well. *The Body Politic*, from Toronto, was a gay liberation publication that considered itself a voice for a national movement, although it was in fact very much preoccupied with Toronto-based concerns, and it often irritated lesbian feminists with its editorial practices. Added to these national efforts were innumerable small publications: groups' newsletters and various attempts to create regional periodicals. Although most were produced and distributed by volunteers, and did not last long, all had the goal of reaching out to lesbians and connecting them with each other.

Whose Scene Was It, Anyway?

Although there were Asian, black, First Nations, and Metis women on the scene, the Canadian lesbians who left a record of their spatial struggles between 1964 and 1984 were primarily white Anglo- and Franco-Canadians.⁷⁰ With a few exceptions, they tended to critique racism and colonialism as political issues similar to homophobia and sexism, rather than seeing them as practices internal to the community. By the mid-1980s, some black and Asian lesbians, and to a lesser extent Aboriginal lesbians, undertook sporadic attempts to create groups by and for themselves, sick and tired of being both hyper-visible and exoticized by white lesbians, on the one hand, and almost completely invisible, in terms of numbers or in terms of their non-lesbian communities, on the other.⁷¹ For a short time, language politics were profoundly significant. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, anglophone organizers of lesbian conferences used the politically charged language of “bi-nationalism” to refer to the struggle between Quebec and the rest of Canada. They publicly supported the idea of sovereignty for Quebec and used government grants to supply bilingual conference materials and simultaneous translation services. These initiatives petered out quite quickly. By

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

the mid-1980s, English-speaking lesbian organizers seemed uninterested, even unaware, that their unilingual work excluded not just many Quebec lesbians, but also the sizable pockets of French-speaking lesbians elsewhere in the country. For their part, francophone lesbians, particularly in Montreal, developed their own political, theoretical, and cultural community, with its own spaces.

Class was an immensely significant axis of difference that influenced the spatial imaginary of Canadian lesbians in particular ways. The term “spatial imaginary” refers to shared beliefs about who belongs where, which organize people’s behaviour.⁷² The predominantly US historical literature on class within lesbian communities has emphasized the split between working-class bar dykes and largely closeted middle-class professionals who sought to distance themselves from the supposed drunken violence and butch-femme codes of the urban bar.⁷³ These class dynamics could be found in large Canadian cities too,⁷⁴ but other factors were also at play. Smaller Canadian cities and towns might not have any bars to which dykes could flock. The limited venues were usually mixed (men and women, sometimes gay and straight) and, at least for a period of time, community-run rather than commercially owned and operated. In the early 1970s, a new embodiment of classed difference emerged in the form of a young university or college student.⁷⁵ She was not necessarily as closeted as her professional foremothers, she might be the first generation of her family to attain post-secondary education, she was displaced from working-class culture, and she did go drinking and dancing in bars. Thus different classes of lesbians rubbed shoulders with differing outcomes depending on where in the country they were.

A number of scholars have already examined the history of lesbian Canada. The three main books that deal with it are Becki Ross’s exploration of lesbian-feminist organizing in Toronto in the 1970s, *The House that Jill Built*; Cameron Duder’s study of middle-class lesbians’ discreet worlds prior to the 1960s, *Awfully Devoted Women*; and Line Chamberland’s *Mémoires Lesbiennes*, which considers working- and middle-class lesbians’ lives in Montreal in the 1950s and 1960s. Each of these tackles a specific community and situates it in its political and cultural milieu, and each has influenced the questions that *Making a Scene* asks about lesbian Canada. There are also several histories of mixed lesbian and gay organizing in Canada. Tom Warner’s *Never Going Back*, Miriam Smith’s *Lesbian and Gay*

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

Rights in Canada, The Canadian War on Queers by Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile, and Valerie Korinek's forthcoming *Prairie Fairies* are all book-length studies. Edited collections include *Sortir de l'Ombre*, edited by Irène Demczuk and Frank W. Remiggi, and *In a Queer Country*, edited by Terry Goldie. With the exception of the works by Chamberland and Korinek, and some of the essays in the collections, little of this work attends in detail to the difference that space makes to lesbian subjectivity, and focuses instead on political struggle and group processes.

Geographers have, naturally, taken a more complex approach to space, and have been careful not just to examine processes of place-making but also to explore the mutual production and effects of gender and space. Analyses of the cultural geography of lesbian and gay place-making have been powerfully influenced by an early claim by Manuel Castells that gay men were territorial and consolidated urban political enclaves, or "gay ghettos," whereas lesbians, as women, were non-territorial. Starting with Sy Adler and Johanna Brenner's rejection of this claim, geographers have now quite extensively explored the different types of space that lesbians and gay men produce. Gill Valentine laid out much of the groundwork for later studies with her examination of how lesbians negotiate and resist predominantly "heterosexual" space and how they recognize each other within it. She also considered the experiences of lesbians living in rural settings in intentional, feminist communities, or "lesbian land," an area also explored by Sine Anahita and Catriona Sandilands, among others. Other scholars have taken up the question of how lesbians occupy urban areas. Tamar Rothenberg on Brooklyn in New York City, Catherine Nash on Toronto, Julie Podmore on Montreal, and Anne-Marie Bouthillette, Jenny Lo, and Theresa Healy on Vancouver have all studied lesbian neighbourhoods, considering whether lesbians have their own version of the "gay ghetto," the gay village, or gay neighbourhood, such as Cabbagetown and Church and Wellesley in Toronto, the West End and Commercial Drive in Vancouver, and the Gay Village in Montreal, as well as how lesbians manage the political and planning context in order to maintain space in the city. Ann Forsyth extends this focus to the fringes of the suburbs with her study of Northampton, Massachusetts. Pride marches and festival spaces, including the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, have been studied by Lynda Johnston, Kath Browne, Kevin Markwell, and Gordon Waitt. Their approaches to these spaces differ, and include the concept of borders that

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

demarcate the reciprocal relationship between lesbians and heteronormative spaces, the role of utopian perceptions, and ideas about what constitutes “politics.”⁷⁶

With the exception of the studies of Montreal by Julie Podmore and of Toronto by Catherine Nash, little of this work looks backward, to consider in detail the significance of the lesbian and mixed spaces as places where lesbian subjectivity could be created. That is to say, existing work tends to examine contemporary lesbian (or now more often queer) spaces, but since lesbian spaces are notoriously ephemeral, older places which have vanished are rarely explored in context. Kath Browne argues that there are several areas where lesbian geography can be expanded, suggesting there are “lesbian spaces and territories that are often overlooked or unseen,” and lesbian spaces of the recent past are just such territory.⁷⁷ This book is an attempt to examine some of their geography, and to notice the different spaces in which lesbians found themselves and each other, and in which being lesbian became possible in new ways. It is not comprehensive: Canada had far too many lesbian spaces between the 1960s and 1980s to deal with each of them. Instead, the book considers different types of space and what they meant. The spaces mattered because they were places where a woman could “be” a lesbian. Women produced the spaces, sometimes alone, sometimes with gay men, and sometimes with straight women, in order to make possible “lesbian identity.”

Cultural geography explores the spaces people create by examining multiple types of sources. In addition to buildings themselves, other sources of information, such as newsletters, organizational minutes and reports, novels, television programs, unpublished memoirs, posters, and photographs, all provide material that combines to flesh out the milieu of the time and the sense lesbians made of their surroundings. This book uses archival records held at the Canadian Women’s Movement Archives, the Saskatchewan Archives Board, the University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections, les Archives gaies du Québec, and the BC Gay and Lesbian Archives. Although it is not an oral history, it also draws on interviews with selected community members: Helen Fallding, Chris Fox, Nancy Poole, Janice Ristock, Cy-Thea Sand, Deb Thomas, Jan Trainor, and Ellen Woodsworth are all lesbians who were actively involved in creating or running lesbian spaces during the 1970s and 1980s. Their stories enrich the picture of the scene, as they recall details of what it felt like to be in

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

particular places or what their goals were in creating spaces where lesbians could congregate.

In order to examine the scene that lesbians in Canada made, this book begins in 1964, the year in which Canada's first homophile organization, the Association for Social Knowledge (ASK), was founded. ASK was unusual in North America because it was a mixed organization with, according to former president Doug Sanders, "a balanced gay/lesbian membership from the start." Reflecting back on this ratio twenty years later, Sanders noted that "it seemed like the logical thing. We didn't realise how distinctive it was."⁷⁸ Although the very first meetings were attended only by gay men, very quickly "Kay and Betty, who were friends of someone's, became involved," and Sanders claimed that "there were some very strong women in the organisation."⁷⁹ ASK's first executive adviser was a woman, Jaye Haris, who resigned in July 1964 to take up a position in San Francisco.⁸⁰ Although Montreal in the 1950s had a bar scene for lesbians, as did Toronto to a lesser extent, the development of a more extensive organized lesbian community really commenced with ASK in the 1960s. From that time on, a lesbian scene developed in fits and starts, gaining momentum in the 1970s and splintering in the early 1980s along lines of racialized identity, class distinctions, generational differences over political priorities, and, in some cases, the redirection of energy to the politics of HIV. The 1980s also saw a generalized shift toward an emphasis on cultural events and academic discussions of sexuality and away from the initial stress on simply creating places to meet. The year 1984 seems to mark the end of that exhilarating period of making a scene, when, not coincidentally, the Progressive Conservative Party under the leadership of Brian Mulroney won a majority in the federal government.

The introduction to Part 1, "Creating Places," argues that particular physical locations provided lesbians with a place where they could go to "be" lesbian and also a sense that there was a situated and bounded lesbian community. Chapter 1 starts by setting out the landscape of commercial bars in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal that permitted lesbian clientele. It explores the links between these bars and criminality, and describes conflicts within the bars over dress codes and routine harassment. It then examines the impetus for lesbian-run bars. The Prairie provinces created a community-run alternative to commercial spaces by setting up membership-only clubs. These had rules and regulations that controlled membership

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

and, in particular, barred straight people in order to protect the lesbian and gay membership from the risk of being exposed. These were often the only consistently operated lesbian and gay spaces in a city, and the second chapter focuses on these clubs. Lesbians quickly decided that in order to create the world they wished to occupy, they needed to own or at least control their own community spaces. They dreamt of women's buildings, lesbian-owned property, and places where their cafés and businesses could be located. Chapter 3 examines these places. It explores contemporary discussions over their purpose and the difficulties in running them.

Canada's sheer physical size, climate, and existing regional politics all influenced the ability of lesbians to physically connect with each other for friendship, sex, and political activism. In response to the "friction of distance,"⁸¹ they formed networks, travelled around Canada to meet up with each other, and launched outreach projects to overcome isolation. The introduction to Part 2, "Overcoming Geography," examines the motive force behind all of this movement. Chapter 4 then provides a discussion of a hallmark of lesbian community in the 1970s and 1980s, which was a series of autonomous lesbian and mixed lesbian and gay conferences. These events were opportunities to debate questions of sexual identity and politics, define the scope and direction of the lesbian movement, and socialize with other lesbians.

Chapter 5 argues that lesbians needed public displays of pride and a visible public presence in order to build culture and community. Events such as public talks, Gaydays, Dyke Marches, the Metamorphosis Festival, Lesbian Days of Visibility, and musical performances were major events which attracted many lesbians. Although the locations of these events were not permanent parts of the scene, the events themselves were repeated from year to year. They therefore built up a sense of community over time and attracted many lesbians. They presented an external face of the community and created an internal space where community diversity and divisions intensified. This chapter explores the role of these events in generating visibility. Finally, although many lesbians were mobile, others remained in place in rural and small-town settings. To overcome the isolation they experienced, groups of lesbians and gay men created various outreach projects to connect rural women with each other and with the larger scene. Chapter 6 discusses these rural lives. The book concludes by arguing that places to meet were fundamental to the formation and growth of the lesbian scene, and therefore the growth of particular forms of lesbian social activity.

Sample Material © 2015 UBC Press

What the book documents overall is the sense of power and possibility that compelled and inspired lesbians from the 1960s onward to find each other and to try to create places through which other lesbians could also find each other. As Jan Trainor states, in lesbian Canada, women “were living a different discourse for a while. For a while we did nothing but act politically, eat politically, dance politically. We played hard and we fought hard and we were never going back.”⁸²