Resilience, Resistance and Relationality: Transformational Politics in Australian Lesbian Grassroots Organising and Community Spaces

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Abstract

This article explores lesbian grassroots organising and community spaces in the past and present within the context of response, reflection, and action. Specifically, it examines how such activist organising efforts and spaces of culture and community in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Australia are responses to the confrontation, violence, alienation and trauma of heterosexist oppression. These responses provide lesbians opportunities to reflect on oppressive systems through the deconstructing of stereotypes and othering, transforming notions of identity and the self toward acceptance. Lesbians are able to act in ways which foster resistance, resilience and healing. In particular, connection with the Australian environment and ecological commitment plays a considerable role in facilitating independence, relationality and psychic healing. However, lesbians in the later twentieth century also experienced internal community fragmentation as reconstructions of the lesbian identity—from broadly negative to celebratory— involved a recognition of intersectional oppressions. Those with privilege grappled with their perpetuation of what were deemed 'patriarchal values'. This article uses AnaLouise Keating's post-oppositional consciousness framework to analyse how Australian lesbians historically responded to issues of intersectional marginalisation—including identity markers such as race and class—within grassroots organising and community space efforts. It also explores potential transformative pathways for the present and future. Post-oppositional consciousness involves an understanding and an embrace of difference to challenge status-quo thinking and generate commonalities among people, rather than insisting on unified notions of sameness. It encourages interconnectedness, relationality, complexity and flexibility. Findings from this article can contribute to research in post-oppositional consciousness theory as well as theories of trauma, identity, social organising and community spaces.

Keywords: LGBT, lesbian, activism, social movements, identity, intersectionality, Australia

Grassroots Organising as Response

Lesbian organising in the West can be traced back to at least the sixteenth century (Vicinus, 1993; Traub, 2001, pp. 435–440); however, it flourished

in the twentieth century with the rise of the Women's and Gay Liberation movements (Blasius and Phelan, 1997; Willett, 2000, p. 66; Edsall, 2003, p. 222). These movements fostered open resistance to heteropatriarchal norms and led to the formation of collectives, communes and clubs that advocated for the freedom to live outside traditional societal expectations.

This article explores lesbian grassroots organising and community spaces from the 1960s to the present, focusing on Australian examples, within the context of response, reflection and action. Geographical contexts have significant impacts on not only the culture of organising but also the capacity for success (Jennings, 2018, p. 92). Thus, the emphasis on Australian iterations is to draw attention to a minimally explored subject in both Australian and more broadly women's history, while examining the specific experiences of lesbian activism on colonised lands. It examines how such activist organising efforts and spaces of culture and community in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are responses to the confrontation, violence, alienation and trauma of heterosexist oppression. These responses provide lesbians with opportunities to reflect on oppressive systems through the deconstructing of stereotypes and othering, transforming notions of identity and the self toward acceptance and generating new values (Ponse, 1978, p. 17; Wolf, 1979; Hoagland, 1988, p. 531; Edsall, 2003; Jennings, 2018, p. 92; Beins and Enszer, 2019; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 4). However, lesbians in the later twentieth century also experienced internal community fragmentation, as reconstructions of lesbian identity—from broadly negative to celebratory—involved a recognition of intersectional oppressions (Rudy, 2001; Jennings, 2009; Jennings, 2018; Luis, 2018). Those with privilege, such as race and class, grappled with their perpetuation of what were deemed the patriarchal "values of the fathers" (Hoagland, 1988, p. 531).

Within grassroots organising and community spaces, lesbians can also act in ways that foster resistance, resilience and healing. Notably, connection with the natural environment and ecological commitment plays a considerable role in facilitating independence, relationality and psychic healing (Hall, 2016, pp. 4–5; 2019, p. 15; 2024, p. 209; Jennings, 2018, p. 95; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 5).

This article begins with an explanation of its methodology, followed by an integrated exploration of lesbian feminist and social movement literature

and the research project's findings. The outcomes utilised AnaLouise Keating's (2013) post-oppositional consciousness framework to understand how lesbians historically responded to issues of difference within grassroots organising and community space efforts. Furthermore, it examines potential transformative pathways for the present and future. As the fostering of lesbian grassroot movements is an ongoing practice, this article will utilise various forms of 'to be' such as 'was', 'is', 'were' and 'are'.

Methodology

This article utilises information from an analysis of literature on themes of lesbianism, lesbian-feminism, grassroots organising, lesbian and queer history, lesbian and women's spaces, lesbian involvement in social movements and activism, intersectionality and feminist ethics. These documents were categorised based on themes of resistance, agency, action, reflection, connection, support, conflict, fragmentation and difference.

Information was also drawn from two datasets: a previous qualitative study on Australian lesbian feminists who have been organising since the 1960s (van Aurich, 2021), and my current PhD research on past and present Australian lesbian communities. The former involved in-depth interviews with six lesbians who resided in Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales between 1970 and 1989 and engaged in forms of lesbian-feminist activism involving back-to-the-land movements, communes and/or separatism.[1] For the latter ongoing PhD project, follow-up interviews were conducted with some participants of the 2021 study, as well as 40 more individuals. All have been anonymised using pseudonyms.

In line with qualitative research standards (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 215), for the 2021 study interviews were recorded over two sessions each, transcribed, thematically and structurally analysed, and subsequently restructured into a narrative chronology that used pseudonyms. The study examined the ways in which lesbians politically organised in a grassroots capacity, highlighting the contributions marginalised groups can make from

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[1] Separatism is a political praxis of physical, emotional and/or psychological separation by an oppressed minority from those they deem to oppress and marginalise them, in addition to centring the minority's needs and experiences. See van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 2.

a local history perspective. Notably, narrative interviews tend to have samples of one or two. Due to the highly private and inaccessible nature of the lesbian population, the study employed purposive sampling, resulting in a slightly larger sample of six lesbians. Recruitment occurred through known members of the target group contacting others who met the desired characteristics (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 266; Savard and Kilpatrick, 2022, p. 972). Of the six women, three identified as having working-class backgrounds, two as having middle-class backgrounds and the remainder did not specify. All participants were white and did not specify a multicultural identity. All six had considerable experience with lesbian grassroots organising in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s, some from multiple regions as they travelled across the nation. Their organising addressed issues of lesbian visibility, safety, health, independence, environmental sustainability, peace and lesbian cultural development. Participants reflected positively on their experiences while also recognising their own and the broader movements' limitations.

My doctoral research utilises Grounded Theory data collection methods, in which research begins with minimal to no theory and involves in-depth explorations of participant experiences, perspectives and meaning (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell and Poth, 2018). These methods are employed through collaborative group interviews and in-depth individual interviews to examine the notion of spaces deemed safe in connection with marginalised identities generally and lesbian identities specifically. Furthermore, my PhD explores the limitations and possibilities of safe spaces in achieving meaningful social change. Within this scope, the research examines past and present experiences of grassroots lesbian organising efforts, including the tactics involved and the consequences of their creation, management and, in some cases, cessation. It explores how lesbians navigate issues of difference utilising post-oppositional consciousness as praxis, both as a theoretical lens and as a methodology for conducting research (Keating, 2013). Before delving into post-oppositional consciousness, this article first outlines the concept of oppositional consciousness.

Theoretical Framework

Oppositional consciousness is an "either/or epistemology and praxis" that shapes politics, perceptions, responses—reflections and actions—through a kind of "resistance energy" (Keating, 2013, pp. 2–3). This 'us vs them' mindset is based on narrow definitions of identity, both individual and collective, and is informed by limited, highly individualistic and antagonistic conceptions of the self that emphasise divisions and keep individuals embedded in conflict (Keating, 2013; Dean, 2018). Difference is perceived as a threat and therefore denied, supressed or ignored, rather than perceived as a path for forging commonalities (Keating, 2013; Dean, 2018; Lizzo-Wilson, Mirnajafi and Louis, 2022). This denial of difference allows for oppositional thinking to flourish and in turn inhibits social change by propagating unproductive suspicion, conflict and competition (Keating, 2007; 2013).

Conversely, as developed by Keating (2013), post-oppositional consciousness is both a theory and a practice of personal and cultural transformation. As a theory, it recognises that all humans are inextricably linked through shared commonalities. It embraces difference, including seemingly mutually exclusive forms of difference (e.g. spiritualism and socialism) (Keating, 2007, p. 26; 2013, p. 16). However, Anna Carastathis (2016) and Keating (2013, p. 37) argue that simply applying intersectional labels to individuals and groups is insufficient for achieving social change, as such labelling multiplies the categories while retaining an internal system of rigid sameness. Rather, Keating (2013, p. 37) proposes using the "labelling process to generate new commonalities". Indeed, she emphasises 'commonalities' over 'sameness', arguing that the former enables the inclusion of difference and positions such differences beyond oppositional modes within a larger context (Keating, 2013, p. 11).

As a practice of transformation, post-oppositional consciousness is relational, involving the critical examination of previously unquestioned assumptions, beliefs and behaviours (Keating, 2013, p. 13; Currans, 2023, p. 177). Notably, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2020, p. 16) describes relationality from an Australian Indigenous perspective as experiencing the self as part of others and vice versa, learned through reciprocity, shared experiences, obligation, cooperation, coexistence and social memory. Through flexibility, dialogue, friendly disagreement and engaging in

overlapping perspectives, space is given for complexity, contradictions and the multiplicity of identity (Keating, 2013; Dean, 2018; Currans, 2023). At the same time, individuals are accountable for their actions, including misunderstandings and harms caused (Currans, 2023, p. 176; Hall, 2024, p. 3).

Employing self-reflection and patience, individuals can shift their identity from a unitary and splintered self toward a "threshold identity", which expands to embrace internal contradictions and differences (Keating, 2013, p. 97). A threshold identity is one that involves multiple positions and shifts between the margin and centre, oppressed and oppressor, and self and other, complicating these seemingly black and white divisions (Keating, 2013, p. 10). Developing such an identity requires openness, vulnerability, trust, effort, time, deeply listening to others' perspectives and experiences, and the willingness to live with contradictions. It is ultimately an active process that *starts* from marginality, rather than treating marginality as an end point (Keating, 2013; Currans, 2023). Having explored the concepts of identity, difference and oppositional and post-oppositional consciousness, this discussion now turns to how these concepts are played out in Australian lesbian feminist praxis.

Discussion: Lesbian Feminist Praxis, Reflection and Action

In response to oppressive experiences, from the 1960s onward lesbians in the West politically organised in reflective and active ways (Abbott and Love, 1972; Wolf, 1979; Bunch, 1987; Hoagland, 1988; Brown, 1995; Willett, 2000, pp. 68–69; Valk, 2010; Burmesister, 2014; Enszer, 2016; Jennings, 2018; Luis, 2018; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 6).

In the mid-twentieth century, the prevailing image of homosexual life was characterised by persecution and vilification. Individuals experienced feelings of loneliness, fear and self-hatred. They were also confronted with abuse and harassment from others (Willett, 2000, p. 3). For example, the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) in 1953, 1957 and 1964 advised the Federal Cabinet against homosexual employment in the public service. According to Graham Willett (2000, p. 11) ASIO described homosexuality as a "character defect" involving "instability, willing self-deceit" and "defiance towards society". Similar attitudes

existed in the United Kingdom and United States during this period (Ponse, 1978; Wolf, 1979; Green, 1997; Edsall, 2003; Lovatt, 2025, pp. 22, 26).

However, new ideas about homosexuality came to the forefront as a result of the efforts of grassroots organisations. For example, in July 1970 a group of Melbourne-based lesbians formed the Australasian Lesbian Movement (ALM). Lucy Chesser (1996, p. 71) highlights that ALM was not only the "first openly homosexual organisation" but also "the first explicitly *political* homosexual organisation formed in Australia". For founding member Marion Paull, the ALM represented a deliberate political awareness as lesbians, as they aimed for tolerance and understanding by educating heterosexual society, to help "erode the taboos and prejudices against homosexuals" (Chesser, 1996, p. 73). Graham Willett (2000, p. 35) and Nicholas Edsall (2003), in their respective historiographical studies on homosexual culture, assert that the actions of the gay rights and feminist movements were the primary reason for shifts in tolerance in Western society.

Lesbian feminism, in which lesbian activists draw upon feminist principles and goals but with a lesbian focus, emerged in Australia around 1970 in response to the Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation movements of the previous decade (Abbott and Love, 1972; Ponse, 1978, p. 78; Wolf, 1979; Tiffin 1993; Wilton, 1995; Dixon, 2010; Valk, 2010; Hall, 2016, p. 14; Robinson, 2016; Arrow and Woollacott, 2019). A research participant in both the 2021 and current projects, Hakia, recalled that:

> We started realising that lesbians need to fight for ourselves, and we were supporting heterosexual women, but they weren't supporting lesbian women's issues and rights. (van Aurich, 2021, p. 50)

Individual lesbian activists were influenced by numerous social justice movements, from unions and socialist initiatives, the New Left, civil rights and Black Power campaigns, anti-racism, peace, anti-nuclear activism, and environmentalist causes (Pakulski, 1991; Bresnahan, 2004; Thompson, 2010; Valk, 2010; Burmeister, 2014; Enszer, 2016; Jennings, 2018; van Aurich, 2021). Drawing upon these ideologies and movements, lesbians

analysed the specificity of lesbian experiences while exploring alternative ways of living and enacting women-centred politics and values.

Two early examples of Australian lesbian feminist organising occurred in 1973. The first took place at a feminist conference in Sorrento, Victoria, where the Australian Radicalesbians, named after the 1970 New York group, presented a talk advocating for the acceptance of lesbianism within the feminist movement. The presentation emphasised the need for visibility, or to 'come out' (Sitka, 1989). The second was organised by the Hobart Women's Action Group, which presented a catalogue of discriminations by feminists against lesbians (Kaplan, 1996). According to Marilyn Lake (1999, p. 244), the group accused the Women's Liberation Movement of ignoring lesbians in the hopes that they would disappear into an "inclusive bisexuality".

Reflecting on the socio-cultural norms around them, often through consciousness-raising and discussion groups, lesbian feminists developed the concept of heterosexism. Charlotte Bunch (1987, p. 185) defines heterosexism as the ideological and institutional domination of heterosexuality that assumes it is the only natural and thus superior sexuality.

This results in the stigmatisation of homosexuality reducing lesbians' status, safety and control (Calhoun, 2003). Moreover, Bunch (1987, p. 187) asserts that heterosexism involves the supposition that women want to be emotionally and/or economically bonded to men and that is fostered through institutions like the family, organised religion, the media and the workplace. In response, lesbians took action by creating their own spaces, focusing on their specific needs and attempting to develop a culture outside of heterosexist influence and norms (Frye, 1993; Dixon, 2010; Megarry, 2020).

Lesbian spaces are perceived as exclusionary in that they deny access to men from the oppressor classes and often heterosexual women, while also reflecting an ideological shift that places women, and more specifically lesbians, at the centre of commitment (Rudy, 2001, pp. 198–199; Valentine and Skelton, 2003, p. 861; The Roestone Collective, 2014, p. 1353). This allowed/allows lesbians to move from a powerless position, toward a form of empowerment, in which they reclaimed control over access and

boundaries, asserting agency (Frye, 1993). As one participant from 2021, Yridji, explained:

> I think it's a great thing for women to be able to take time away from men, to think. Particularly in groups. (van Aurich, 2021, p. 49)

This denial of access is often articulated by critics as a form of hatred toward the other. Conversely, unlike the antagonism of oppositional consciousness, which directs negative energy outward, the denial of access, or exclusion, is articulated as a kind of protective withdrawal of energy to focus inward for survival and wellbeing (Hoagland, 1988; Keating, 2013; van Aurich, 2021). Notably, many current Australian lesbian spaces advertise themselves as inclusive, in some cases including allies, however, this does not negate their fundamentally exclusionary nature as a way of challenging oppressive systems. Another research participant, Teatree, expressed the purpose of exclusionary spaces for marginalised people:

> I think it's probably necessary for lots of women or lots of people at different times … to build and live their own sub-culture … to have a supportive– a really wholly supportive environment to rebuild themselves. In order to be able to function in what is such a hostile society. (van Aurich, 2021, p. 45)

Lesbian spaces in the West were/are both urban and rural, encompassing households, squats, dances, bookstores, record labels, publishing companies, theatre and circus groups, educational programs, community centres, workshops, libraries, archives, conferences and festivals (Hoagland, 1988; Brown, 1995; Green, 1997; Ion, 1997; Dixon, 2010; Valk, 2010; Burmeister, 2014; Jennings, 2018; Luis, 2018; van Aurich, 2021; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 8). Many of these spaces were/are organised by lesbian feminist grassroots collectives and informal co-operatives (Green, 1997; Hall, 2019, pp. 14, 114; van Aurich, 2021). They also include more generally women-centred spaces predominantly or entirely organised by lesbians, such as lands (where large groups of women live rurally together), schools, cafes, radio programs, shelters and health centres (Hoagland, 1988; van Aurich, 2021). Within these spaces, lesbians explore the multifaceted aspects of their existence, often articulated through

newsletters, magazines, films, chapbooks and other creative and political
works that foster connection, document local and national events and
discuss ideas (Brown, 1995; Green, 1997 Rudy, 2001; Burmeister, 2014;
van Aurich, 2021; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 8).

Urban spaces, particularly share houses, provide lesbians with the
opportunity to reflect on their experiences as women and homosexuals in a
generally supportive, lesbian-centred environment. For example, Teatree
said that living in a lesbian share house "provided a safe space … to
experience just being with women without the pressure of pretending to be
[heterosexual]" (van Aurich, 2021, p. 44). By examining socio-cultural
structures and institutions around them, lesbians were/are able to focus their
grassroots organising efforts and more effectively address their needs.
Indeed, another participant, Myrtle, emphasised her capacity to reflect and
question norms, stating that:

> I think we were prepared to question things a lot more than what
> most of the rest of society were prepared to do … I think there
> was a strength in that. (van Aurich, 2021, p. 67)

In Australian rural spaces, connection with the natural environment
plays a considerable role in facilitating independence, relationality and
psychic healing (Hall, 2016, pp. 4–5; 2019, p. 137; 2024; van Aurich, 2021,
p. 66). The purpose of rural lesbian lands or communes is often described
as the pursuit of a utopia, free from lesbophobia, the norms imposed on
women, racism and classism (Hall, 2016, p. 16). It is a kind of freedom
from capitalist modes of living. As Laurene Kelly states, "Time enters
another dimension. It is rejuvenating for the spirit and mind" (Hall, 2016,
pp. 9–10). Similarly, Mei Ling describes the psychic shift experienced
while surrounded by other lesbians on rural land:

> I had spent my life wandering aimlessly intent on self-destruction.
> I had a low sense of my own worth and never felt as if I belonged
> anywhere. The Mountain and her women gave me a sense of
> being valued, a sense of belonging. I felt as if I had come home.
> (Hall, 2016, p. 146)

The wide-open spaces allowed lesbians to freely express their emotions;
laughter, jubilant shouts and crying could be heard echoing across the land

(Hall, 2019, p. 143). The healing capacity of nature was also discussed by Hakia:

> As a lesbian you were surrounded by this very oppressive world. […] [Lesbians] would come into the women's land and they would suddenly experience that they were in a world where they were safe. Where they were accepted as who they are. A woman, a lesbian. And they would immediately get sick [*laughs*]. And we called it the healing crisis. It was very obvious; it happened all the time. They'd get there, and they'd get sick. Women would just look after them, we went, "Oh here comes a new woman we have to initiate". Certain women were great at this, and they'd get herbs, and they'd feed them herbal teas and give them massages and kind of look after them while they went through this crisis. And then they'd come through it and they would feel comfortable, they'd feel healthy again and comfortable with themselves. But I just thought it was very interesting seeing that transition from one world to another. It was like the weight of gravity was lifted off women and they would sort of collapse. (van Aurich, 2021)

Connection to the natural environment also reflects lesbian feminist commitment to ecological principles of sustainability, low impact and conservation (Hall, 2016, p. 13; 2019; 2024, p. 57). Caretaking the land— living in harmony with it rather than exploiting it—engaging in environmental safety practices, building basic and complex shelters, which involved learning carpentry, stonework, roofing, tiling and more, and growing food enabled lesbians to develop typically 'masculine' skills and live in 'empowering' and autonomous ways (Valk, 2010; Jennings, 2018, p. 99; Hall, 2016, p. 147; 2019, p. 3; 2024; van Aurich, 2021, p. 9). According to Rebecca Jennings (2018, p. 94), for many lesbians in Australia, the natural environment represented a kind of rural idyll away from the oppressive, corrupt and exhausting urban spaces.

However, the natural environment also significantly impacts lesbians' capacity to enact their politics. For example, the New South Wales lesbian lands experienced extreme temperatures, cycles of drought and flooding. These weather events resulted in food shortages, forest encroachment, relative isolation and generally unfertile land that made rural living a daunting experience (Jennings, 2018; Hall, 2019, p. 116; 2024; Cocoran, 2020). Many of the Australian lands lacked running water and electricity, faced food and financial instability due to many residents relying on

welfare, and were home to dangerous or unpleasant wildlife, like snakes, spiders, ticks and leeches (Cocoran, 2020; Hall, 2016, pp. 129–130; 2019, p. 30; 2024, p. 99). Keely Jobe describes life on rural land as follows:

> If you want a cup of coffee you need to collect the firewood, start a fire then wait half an hour for the water to boil. If you want a shower you can have a freezing cold stream dip, complete with overly friendly leeches, or you can pour a kettle of warm water over yourself and scramble to wash the soap off. (Hall, 2016, p. 118)

Land management is a huge part of the experience, and lesbians in the past argued extensively over the difficulty of farming, ecological conservation approaches, the use of machinery and domestication of animals, among other issues (Hall, 2016, p. 38). Lesbians on Australian lands were faced with the complexity of colonisation. As Aquila (Hall, 2016, p. 138) expressed, "We lived on Aboriginal Land yet few Aboriginal women came to the lands. Life was full of contradictions". Conversely, lesbian lands in the northern hemisphere emphasise an ideal environment, with fertile soil, cheap land and beautiful landscapes (Burmeister, 2014, p. 64). There seemed to be more consensus among lesbians about the use of machines and the consumption of meat and alcohol on European lands; for example, they were considered as "patriarchal evils" in Wales (Hall, 2016, p. 91).

Another form of reflective lesbian grassroots organising was/is the changing of language away from patriarchal norms that position men as the default, toward women—and more specifically lesbian—centred expressions (Ponse, 1978; Jennings, 2009; Jennings 2018; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023). According to Sarah Lucia Hoagland (1988, p. 538), language is both a tool of oppression and integral to "any transformation of consciousness". It functions as oppression by restricting our perception to the values and categories of the oppressor class, or, as Hoagland (1988, p. 539) states "the language we speak is the language of the fathers". Whereas regarding the latter, once lesbians become aware of their oppression, language is susceptible to change through participation and consensus (Hoagland, 1988, p. 539). A part of this transformation was/is also redefining what it means to be a lesbian in society and within oneself. Lesbian grassroots organising involved considerable social events that

expressed joy and celebration of lesbianism, including dances, discos, music and cultural festivals (Green, 1997; Hall, 2016; van Aurich, 2021; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 8).

Lesbians also responded to oppressive norms through grassroots political action like protests. Whether improvised in the moment or held once, occasionally or annually, lesbian public actions include anti-war and anti-nuclear demonstrations, women's peace camps—for example, Greenham Common, Pine Gap and Cockburn Sound—abortion rallies, International Women's Day rallies, postering political signs and slogans, spray-painting, vandalism to sexist businesses and advertising, public demonstrations of lesbian affection, and Reclaim the Night marches (Green, 1997, p. 135; Bartlett, 2013; van Aurich, 2021, pp. 40, 68; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 8; Eschle and Bartlett, 2023).

Through reflection and action, Australian lesbians brought the specificity of their experiences to the forefront of their organising efforts, challenging oppressive societal norms. They were able to address their needs, support healing and explore the multifaceted aspects of their lives. However, such actions and reflections were not always beneficial or effective, sometimes leading to fragmentation among groups and within the overarching lesbian community.

Community Fragmentation

Although lesbian grassroots organising creates a strong sense of community and challenges oppressive socio-cultural structures, it can also involve tension, conflict and other forms of negative experience. In the late twentieth century, tensions primarily emerged around issues of difference as forms of intersectional analysis emerged, particularly regarding race and economic class identity (Hoagland, 1988; Carillo Rowe, 2008; Carastathis, 2016; Dean, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2020). In addition to race and class, differences of (dis)ability, age and ideological position could be ignored, disavowed or intensely and ultimately ineffectively debated (Alice *et al.*, 1988; Green, 1997; Rudy, 2001; Luis, 2018; Megarry, 2020; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 5). Hoagland (1988, pp. 532–533) asserts that this is due to the perpetuation of patriarchal values of dominance and subordination, including the unquestioned use of language laden with

sexist, heterosexist, racist and ableist values. Sand Hall agrees, reflecting on her time in the New South Wales lesbian lands as follows:

> Of course, we brought some baggage with us. Having grown up in a man's world, we had that conditioning in our heads and in our actions. (Hall, 2016, pp. 1–3)

Similarly, Chris Sitka (Hall, 2016, p. 34) stated that:

> we brought within us the damage that oppression causes. We acted out our wounds and dysfunctions. We argued and fought. (Hall, 2016, p. 34)

In her study of British lesbian feminists, Sarah Green (1997, pp. 43–44) asserts that tensions emerged due to simultaneous yet conflicting politics of commonality—which placed internal group differences as secondary—and personal experience, that highlighted inter- and intra-group difference. The denial of difference was, in part, due to a perceived need for a united front, an efficient and effective way to address the needs of lesbians as a class, which ultimately asserted a false universal lesbian experience. Because difference can be perceived as threatening to the unity of a group—with fears of dissent, disloyalty and fragmentation—responses can involve a prioritisation and emphasis of a singular identity that all within the group must adhere which downplays, oversimplifies and/or under-explores variation (Keating, 2013; O'Sullivan, 2015; Dean, 2018; Lizzo-Wilson, Mirnajafi and Louis, 2022). However, this universalisation was/is ultimately ineffective as lesbian identity becomes rigid and narrow, with demands of conformity and the questioning of commitment to other identities (Anzaldúa, 1999; Rudy, 2001; Hong, 2006; Keating, 2013; Dean, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2020, p. 32). Indeed, as Crenshaw (1991, p. 1242) asserts, "ignoring difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups".

As a part of this denial of difference over a false sense of unity, Keridwen Luis (2018, pp. 45–46) and Moreton-Robinson (2020, p. 45) argue white racial identity is invisibilised and naturalised, that is, positioned as not a race, and thus is considered the neutral norm to which all else is 'other'. They argue this silence around whiteness sustains the use of its supremacist power, including within feminist and lesbian feminist organising,

invisibilising white women's racial privilege (Luis, 2018, p. 46; Moreton-Robinson, 2020, p. 45). Therefore, those with multiple marginalised identities and lived experiences, particularly lesbians of colour, can encounter what Crenshaw (1991, p. 1252) terms "intersectional disempowerment", in which they are required to have an either/or priority in their politics and actions, detrimentally splitting their energies between groups. It demands a kind of fractionalisation of the self, denying one's varying needs as a multiply marginalised individual (The Combahee River Collective, 2014). For example, indigenous feminists in Australia such as Wendy Holland, Jackie Huggins and Moreton-Robinson emphasise the importance of alliances and reciprocity between Indigenous communities, working together to empower themselves while acknowledging their differences (Gays and Lesbians Aboriginal Alliance, 1993; Huggins, 1987, p. 122; Moreton-Robinson, 2020, p. 151).

Indeed, for many Australian Indigenous women, issues of racial and class oppression can be more pressing than those of sex and sexuality (Huggins, 1987; 2022). Moreover, as Moreton-Robinson (2020, p. 68) argues, feminism is not always the "political home" for all women.

In addition to multiple identities and lived experiences, those with differing political positions can experience lesbian groups as hostile and combative (Green, 1997; Ion, 1997; Hall, 2016, pp. 28, 138; 2019, p. 110). In Australian lesbian feminist grassroots organising, the personal and the political were constantly reflected upon, with many norms around womanhood, sexuality, lifestyle, privacy, work, inclusion of men, including boy children and organising structures questioned and heavily debated (Green, 1997; Ion, 1997; Jennings, 2016; Hall, 2019, pp. 109–112; 2024) According to Myrtle:

> I think we were prepared to question things a lot more than what most of the rest of society were prepared to do […] I think there was a strength in that. (van Aurich, 2021, pp. 66–67)

Although not utilised by every group, consensus decision-making with an emphasis on non-hierarchical structures were/are common. However, some lesbians experience the endless conversations involved in consensus decision-making as exhausting and an ineffective tactic (van Aurich, 2021, p. 62). For example, Lazuli (Hall, 2024, p. 184) recalled that "making

decisions about absolutely anything could take a week, if not a year". Such discussions risk those with the strongest opinions, loudest voice or who can argue more confidently 'winning' (van Aurich, 2021, p. 72). During discussion lesbians may also support their friends or those they are politically aligned with, whether it is the position they themselves believe in (van Aurich, 2021, p. 72).

Consensus and non-hierarchy also do not work in certain organising circumstances, even of a grassroots nature. In health and crisis centres, for example, such structures can be ineffective, particularly when health professionals are involved or employed. Teatree reflected on her experiences at the women's health centre she helped organise, stating that:

> It was a tension between our feminist commitment to equality and the essential authority that doctors have to have in delivering health services … they've all got specific responsibilities that can't be faded away in a collective. (van Aurich, 2021, p. 54)

Therefore, in examples like these, despite the best of intentions in organising in an ethical manner using feminist principles of democracy and care, a commitment to consensus and non-hierarchy resulted in conflict and strain among the collectives.

Another difference in lived experience and ideological position that can cause tension is men's inclusion in Australian lesbian spaces. During the 1970s and 1980s, the issue of including male children was heavily debated, particularly in Australia (Ion, 1997; Jennings, 2016; Hall, 2019, pp. 109–112). Some lesbian feminists argued that to ensure they could dedicate as much of their time and energy as possible away from patriarchal influence and commitments, and instead toward their grassroots organising and lesbian liberation, lesbians needed to no longer associate nor live with men (Ion, 1997; Jennings, 2016; van Aurich, 2021; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 5). One participant from 2021, Sage, reflected that, "it just made a political statement that we had to be strong, as patriarchy had it for so long" (van Aurich, 2021, p. 41). Lesbians who agreed with this position but had male children either left male children at home to attend meetings, events or volunteer or moved out of the home to live in a lesbian feminist house or land, leaving the child with the father or other relative (Green, 1997; Jennings, 2016; van Aurich, 2021). Lesbians who lived together in shared

housing would often have a rule that male relatives were not allowed to visit, sometimes not even go to the front door (van Aurich, 2021, p. 41). However, it could also be a grievous experience, due to separation and feelings of guilt (van Aurich, 2021, p. 34). Mulga, a research participant, recalled saying to a friend at the time, "This is the pain that goes with social change" (van Aurich, 2021, p. 34).

Conversely, lesbians with male children or who wanted to include their relatives and friends in their activism felt alienated by the stances of many lesbian groups, events, houses and lands. Those with male children in particular felt as though they were both insiders and outsiders of organising groups not only because they went against the common political position at the time by loving their boys and seeing them as neither a threat nor a negative influence, but also because they were often forced to choose where they could go and what they could attend (Jennings, 2016, p. 71; van Aurich, 2021, pp. 44–45).

The experiences of lesbian feminists in their grassroots organising exemplifies the limitations of reflection and action, specifically, how the denial of difference ultimately leads to fragmentation of groups. Lesbians who experience ostracisation and alienation, or become frustrated and exhausted with how their concerns, needs and positions are policed and/or lessened, ultimately leave groups and spaces, which results in a loss of community and political power (Hoagland, 1988; Rudy, 2001; Keating, 2013; Jennings, 2016; Luis, 2018; van Aurich, 2021; Lizzo-Wilson, Mirnajafi and Louis, 2022). However, such fragmentation is not inherent to the community, nor to grassroots organising efforts. One potential pathway for responding to issues of difference in the present and future is post-oppositional consciousness.

Transformative Pathways

For lesbian grassroots organising to sustain, and thus address and resist oppression without risking ineffective conflict and fracturing of groups, lesbians must engage in reflective and active processes which foster post-oppositional consciousness (Keating, 2013, p. 8). Indeed, according to Hoagland (1988, p. 532), without changes in values affirmed through one's interactions, particularly from dominance and subordination toward lesbian agency, ethics, integrity and relationality, there can be no meaningful

transformative social change. By perceiving each other in ways which encompass all aspects, including varied backgrounds and political positions, and deeply listening to one another's experiences, lesbians can generate radical alliances and move forward in their grassroots organising (Hoagland, 1988; Keating, 2013; Carastathis, 2016).

As previously discussed, post-oppositional consciousness can be achieved by embracing difference, bridging commonalities through relational dialogue and self-reflection, which accounts for internal differences and contradictions (Carillo Rowe, 2008, p. 4; Keating, 2013, pp. 16–17; Carastathis, 2016, p. 203). Through reflection, a lesbian can accept their position in the world as both oppressed and oppressor (Moraga, 1983, p. 29; Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 100; Keating, 2013, p. 97). For example, Huggins (2022, p. 38) asserts there can be no "true political alliances between Black and white women" without the latter acknowledging their contributions and collaborations with white men in Indigenous oppression. Huggins (2022, pp. 122–123) argues that although Black women prefer to be separate in their struggles due to differences in agenda, alliances can be made between "Aboriginal, non-English-speaking-background and Anglo-Australian women", provided white women understand their limitations and what is no longer their business, stepping away so that Indigenous women "do the rest". In the case of lesbian lands in colonised nations, engaging with local Indigenous communities, recognition of Australian Indigenous custodianship of Country, and treaty making are potential pathways forward (Hall, 2024, pp. 1–2). The preservation and ecological conservation of the land without residing on it—thus protecting them from capitalist environmental destruction—is another path (Hall, 2019, p. 116; 2024, p. 57). As Hall explains:

> After 50 years of caring for these Lands as Women's Land, it
> looks to me like our Lands communities are entering a new phase.
> Perhaps, like the snakes that love the Lands, we shed one skin,
> grow into the next. (2024, pp. 2–3)

Importantly, this process does not preclude mistakes. It is a journey of errors and stumbles made by imperfect individuals toward mutual understanding (Keating, 2013, p. 55). Elizabeth Currans (2023, p. 175) argues that political and social alliances can survive by confronting the

failures, misunderstandings and harms of the past, and continuing to "show up when working together becomes difficult". As Hoagland states:

> We make many mistakes, and sometimes we stay in patterns for a long time as we try to understand them. But when we finally understand how a given pattern functions destructively, we act to change. (Hoagland, 1988, p. 543)

Conclusion

Through the praxis of grassroots organising, which generates spaces of culture and community, lesbian activism responds to oppression via reflection and action. Reflections include socio-cultural analysis and criticism, including the coining of the term heterosexism, the changing of language and the sharing of ideas through lesbian networks and creative or political expression. Similarly, actions involve the development of lesbian and women-centred spaces, both urban and rural, as well as protests. These efforts create a positive sense of what it means to be lesbian, provides opportunities to develop skills and knowledge and can generate a sense of connection and belonging.

However, historically within these spaces lesbians carried with them patriarchal values which fostered oppositional consciousness. Over time, and with increasing awareness of difference among the lesbian community, spaces and groups were filled with intense debate and conflict. Lesbians responded to these intersectional issues through denial and silence, resulting in spaces becoming fractured and fragmentary.

Through post-oppositional consciousness the mistakes of the past and present can be acknowledged and actively navigated, allowing for the continuation and survival of lesbian grassroots organising. In turn, through grassroots organising, activists can effectively address lesbians' multi-faceted needs and create meaningful social change in the future.

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