COMING (OUT) TO CANADA: NARRATIVES OF WOMEN WHO IMMIGRATE TO CANADA USING THE SAME-SEX PARTNER PROCESS

by

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ABSTRACT

For the decade prior to the recognition of same-sex partnerships in immigration law in June 2002, overseas same-sex partners of Canadians could use an appeal on Humanitarian and Compassionate (H&C) grounds to become permanent residents of Canada. While using this process and then volunteering with the Lesbian and Gay Immigration Taskforce (LEGIT), I saw the need to better understand the experiences of immigrants who come to Canada in a same-sex relationship. I also recognized the potential for the stories of queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual (QLGB) immigrants to contribute to research on how migration shapes QLGB sexualities, thereby enriching understandings of psychosocial processes occurring with migration as well as of sexualities.

Using life-story interviews of women who used the H&C process, I investigate women’s constructions of their sexual self while narrating their immigration experience. I interviewed 3 women who used the H&C process to settle in Canada with their partners—1 from an Asian country and 2 from European countries. Following a collaborative form of narrative inquiry developed by Arvay (2003), I involved participants in a joint interpretation process and wrote narratives that comprise four aspects of their experience: (a) how they came to understand their sexualities in their home country, (b) the development of their relationships, (c) the application process, and (d) settling in Canada. In each of these aspects, participants are stretching or defying normative life-scripts for women and engaging with oppressions of heterosexism, racism, neo-colonialism, and classism to do so. Each of these processes provides potential catalysts for self revision as women encounter new discourses around women’s and QLGB sexualities and have new experiences of self. Understanding the telling of the narrative as one instance of construction of self. I interpreted the narrative interviews to understand how women
constructed their sexual self, while recognizing that sexual self is constitutive of and by other selves. I attended to the meanings women made of their relationships, their engagement with authority, and their different social contexts.

The objectives for this research are theoretical, applied, and transformative. The narratives of the 3 participants inform efforts to develop better theoretical conceptualizations of sexual orientation identity formation that can accommodate the fluidity and diversity of women’s sexualities. The applied purpose of my research was to help organizations within the queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered (QLGBT) and immigrant communities understand the experiences and needs of QLGB immigrants in Canada. Finally, women immigrating to be with their same-sex partners have asserted not only their legal and political rights, but also their rights of intimate citizenship (Plummer, 1995) by building relationships, selves, and lives that stretch the bounds of the possible. Their stories are examples of lives that push limits.
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Life shrinks
or expands
in proportion to our courage

Expands with doors pried open and stepped through
with thresholds crossed into journeys made
in giant strides or small, tentative steps
embracing our fear
stepping forth, holding it gently at our side

With brave leaps
off cliffs or first diving boards
into the bracing, waters below
Suspended
Surfacing to bask in the sunlit glow of
I DID IT!

Expands with questions asked
with an open heart
open to possibilities, avenues, alternatives
and perhaps more questions

With uncertainty held up to view
like an exquisite portrait
not hidden shamefully
in some dark corner

Expands with each feeling felt and shared
clear voiced, in faltering whispers,
or silent communion
I hurt, I love, I rage, I lust

Expands with injustices named and challenged
with visions shared
inspiring hope and compassionate commitment
in the face of risks

With boundaries, borders, and limits stretched
with edges surfed
with passions boldly lived and danced
each at our own tempo
not knowing, or caring,
if our heart is pounding
with exhilaration
or fear
or ecstasy

with gratitude, Sharalyn Jordan

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1 A paraphrase of Anais Nin
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Canada is one of the few countries in the world to recognize same-sex partners for immigration purposes. Official recognition came into effect June 28, 2002. However, in the decade prior to recognition....

or should I start...

Only since 2002 has Canada recognized same-sex couples as family under immigration law. Despite this lack of official recognition, in practice same-sex partners of Canadian permanent residents have been able to apply for permanent residency using appeals on Humanitarian and Compassionate (H&C) grounds.

How do I choose the starting point, the words, the structures, to craft this story?

These stories.

...It was through the lobbying of LEGIT the Lesbian and Gay Immigration Task Force that this process was established, and through their public education work, monthly drop-ins, a traveling road-show, and endless e-mails, that the process was accessed by as many as two thousand same-sex partners.

Do you want to know more?

The personal journey that women make when they immigrate to be with their same-sex partners is uncharted territory. These women have forged life paths that diverge from the familiar and expected by choosing women as their intimate partners and by leaving their home countries as adults to settle in a new country. Personal boundaries of self and subjectivity stretch and transform as these women cross geographical
boundaries, encountering new ways of being and understanding themselves. I have accompanied one woman on such a journey, and have used reflections on this journey as a starting point and compass during my investigation. I see myself as a fellow traveller who has walked a different journey through some similar, and not so similar, terrain. My own journey has shaped how I retell these stories—the details I include and omit, the tone of my voice.

*Where do I begin the story of my own journey? Which step do I begin with?*

I have described myself as a lesbian for just over a decade now and in that time I have lived in Canada, in Korea as an exchange student, and in Thailand as a teacher.

*Stop. Becoming a lesbian didn't happen in one step. It is a name I took some time to embrace—comfort with it came more easily in some situations than others.*

*The meaning of the name and how I embody it has changed for me over the years.*

In each city I have lived in, I have tapped into some sort of community of lesbians. In Seoul I found Sappho a small group of lesbian and bisexual women, some Korean and some expatriates, who met regularly for support and dinner. A group of us travelled to Saitama, Japan to celebrate Golden Week with 150 lesbians at a retreat. In Thailand, I made monthly trips into Bangkok where I found Anjaree, a growing group of *ying rak ying* -- women who love women, *toms* and *dees*. In each of these cities I noticed commonalities and differences in how women live and understand their attraction to women. I have also come to appreciate the myriad of social discourses that women engage with when they construct sexualities centred on women.
If you are versed in the language of one of my speech communities, queer community activists and academics, my use of women who love women, and even lesbian and bisexual, to tell my story dates and locates me. For those who are not, I will interpret some of the layers of meaning.

Ying rak ying was coined recently by women in Anjaree because a Thai word did not exist to describe an identity based on women’s same-sex desire. Tom and dee had become too constricting at a time when some women were questioning and challenging traditional the butch/femme-like dichotomies. Lesbian was rejected by many women, because it carried strong negative associations with pornography. For myself, Ying rak ying in its English translation, evoked early 20th century lesbian pulp fiction, although I was told that that is not where the term came from. Queer circulated on websites and among small groups of western educated Thais and a some younger expatriates. Even then, it functioned for me more as an intellectual possibility rather than a point of connection for community or embodied identity. It is only since returning to Canada, that queer has become a meaningful source of both identity and community for me.

While living in Thailand I met my current partner, a woman who has bravely moved with me to Canada. We used the H&C appeal process for same-sex couples created by LEGIT.

Convincing?

Attending monthly LEGIT drop-ins as a volunteer I have met and heard the stories of others in cross-border same-sex relationships as I helped them learn the application process.

Yes, that is what I am doing, but I invite you to keep questioning.
When partners are granted status they often return to drop-ins to share their success story. It was during these meetings that I decided this research was worth doing.

I recognized the potential for the immigration stories of women who settled in Canada using the same-sex H&C process to be sources of information, critical reflection, and inspiration. Women who have used this process are women who have successfully broken the rules. They have lived lives that deviate from normative life paths of women and engaged with a matrix of enabling and constraining impacts of oppressions of racism, heterosexism, classism, and neo-colonialism to do so: they have acted on their attraction to women, built relationships centred on women, chosen to relocate away from their cultures and families of origin, and engaged with a discriminatory bureaucracy in order to be able to settle in Canada. In their stories, they tell us how they did it, and what it has meant to them. It was the transformative potential of the women’s narratives that drew me to this research.

At the same time, as a graduate student in counselling psychology, I was reading the discipline’s efforts to understand QLGB sexualities. Psychology as a discipline, in part because it has modeled itself after the natural sciences, has been slower than other social sciences to acknowledge in its research the mutable, relational, and contextualized qualities of sexualities. There is growing recognition of the need to enhance understanding of connections among sexualities, sociocultural context, and race/ethnicity. I saw the potential for an investigation of women’s narrative construction of their QLGB sexual self before, during, and after immigration to contribute to the growing body of scholarship within the discipline that aims to address this gap.
I asked women to tell me their stories of using the H&C process for same-sex partners to immigrate to Canada. With their input, I interpreted the interviews. I then constructed narratives based on our interpretations. Be aware that the words women chose to tell their stories to me, and the words I have chosen to tell them to you are not entirely our own. Words have their own histories and traditions (Wertsch, 1991). When we speak, even to ourselves, we use a public language (Gergen, 1997). To tell their stories women engage in a creative struggle with language to make words saturated with pre-given meanings, mean what they want, and in the process, to bring their self into the interaction. It is this creative struggle that I am investigating. I seek to understand women's efforts to negotiate their changing discursive terrain.

I have begun this inquiry with highlights of my own journey. In using the metaphor of a journey am I positioning myself as an explorer, a discoverer, a translator, or guidebook? None of them are positions I wanted to occupy, but the temptation has been there. The tradition of my academic audience has pulled and pushed me into authorial positions I have worked to resist; the detached translator, the explorer of exotic lands, the scientist dissecting life-forms into discrete analyzable parts. This research holds a part of my own struggle to engage with the academic traditions of a discipline that has harmed and pathologized people like me, and that continues to reify dichotomous notions of gender and sexual diversity. Most recently, scholars within my chosen discipline have worked to position it as a champion of human diversity, aiming to provide better, more sensitive, services to a broader spectrum of society, including QLGBT communities. In conducting this research, I have been in an uneasy alliance with this champion. I believe the intentions are genuine, but question whether the tools,
specifically the conceptual tools, research paradigms, and service models we have are adequate to the task. I am not alone in raising these questions, and have found research tools within the discipline that address my concerns. This study is a small step towards expanding possibilities. The literature I draw on as well as the language and form I use, hold my struggle with the enabling and constraining forces of the traditions and expanding tools of my discipline.

I have kept these questions in mind as I have engaged in this inquiry: How do I resist the pull to detach, to exotify, to dissect? How do I tell these stories in a familiar enough form and language without being drawn into these positions? How do I tell these stories without interpreting out the challenging parts? A skilled storyteller knows how to push the boundaries of the intelligible, how to challenge her listeners without losing them. Will I? How do I describe experiences and places known to neither me nor my audience without romanticizing them? How do I tell these stories in a way that allows women to remain vibrant, complex human beings?

I have a stake in how these stories are received. How honest am I prepared to be about my stake? How will I be able to tell how this stake weaves its way into my stories?

*Will you? Will you listen for it?*
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Investigating the narratives of women who have immigrated to Canada using the H&C process for same-sex partners has the potential to draw connections among psychosocial processes occurring with migration and the formation of women’s QLGB sexualities. In this chapter, I begin by contrasting modernist perspectives of the self with postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives. Similarly, I contrast these paradigms’ perspectives on gender and sexual orientation. I do this for two reasons: first, to identify assumptions that underlie a significant portion of the psychological research on sexualities; second, to locate and clarify the perspectives on self, gender, and sexualities that I work with in this study. In the next section, I review the literature on women’s immigration experiences, raising issues from this literature that are relevant to the experiences of women who have immigrated to Canada to be with their same-sex partners. In the last section of this chapter, I review current efforts to research and conceptualize women’s QLGB sexual orientation identity formation process. I highlight gaps in current knowledge and argue that the personal accounts of immigrating QLGB women may help address some of these gaps through the insights these women have gained from their bicultural experience of their sexualities.

Perspectives on Self

Modern psychology posits the existence of a psychological self to explain the fact that people experience themselves, and others, as relatively coherent and stable. Internal mental processes and representations were understood to be the root of the self, and the self was conceptualized as a closed system. Modernist perspectives theorized a
true or authentic self, autonomous and independent of context, that is realized and expressed. Research informed by a modernist perspective views the self as singular with knowable, relatively stable, characteristics. Inconsistencies or discontinuity are viewed as evidence of inauthenticity or suppression of a person's true and essential nature.

Recent work from social constructivist and social constructionist perspectives has contributed to a renewed interest in and reconceptualization of the self (Mahoney, 2003; Mischel & Morf, 2003). I situate my own work within this on-going paradigm shift (Mahoney, 2003; Raskin, 2002). Briefly, the guiding themes that constructivists use to understand human experience are 1) active agency 2) ordering processes 3) self- 4) social-symbolic relatedness, and 5) lifespan development (Mahoney, 2003). Humans actively and continuously organize and pattern their experience, beginning with ourselves. We pattern our world, from our embodied experience, in a manner that is self-referent and recursive. We engage in an on-going process of organizing self. Constructivist psychology has contributed a view of self as a complex open system or process (Mahoney, 1991). As a process, the self is mutable, always in revision, never complete. Our sense of stability and coherence, as well as change and discontinuity are produced. In this view, the self is no longer understood as rooted in purely psychological or internal mental structures. Instead, multiple levels of explanation, including linguistic, social, cultural, interactional, and biological including brain structure and function, are being explored for their contributions to self (Wortham, 1999).

Although I acknowledge the potential contribution of multiple levels in the process of self construction, it is the social, relational, and interactional contributors to self, as manifested in language, that are the focus of my inquiry. The construction of self
is socially mediated, occurring in relationship and interaction with others and the environment, through language and activity (Wertsch, 1991). Relational views of self contribute an understanding of ways that we produce and reproduce our self in our relationships of contrast and similarity, and of connection and separation with others (Mahoney, 2000). Self production occurs through our interactions with others, creating a self that is populated both by those physically present in our lives and by those who are psychologically significant (Gergan, K, 1991; Gergan, M. 1997; McAdams, 1993).

Understanding the construction of self as a dialogical process focuses attention on ways that the self is constructed in interaction through language (Smith, 1999; Wertsch, 1991). The self comes into being and operates in the context of symbolic communication (Smith, 1991). We come to know our world and our self through interaction with the discursive practices and discourses within which we live. The self individuates in an ongoing matrix of the social (Smith, 1991). We are enabled and constrained by this matrix of mutually constituting multiple constructions. The multiplicity of relationships and positions we inhabit create multiple experiences of self. More than roles taken on, these self-identity constructions may comprise their own values and perspectives. However, self-identity constructions are multiple, but not endlessly fragmented, or fractured. We are bound by flexible, semi-permeable limits of our bodies, intelligibility, and the material world.

The self is situated in and bound by our context; in constructing our self we draw on cultural resources from metaphors and myths to media images (Gergan, K. 1991; Reissman, 1993). The language of the self and self-expression available to us in our cultures is woven into our experience of self (Gergan, K.1991). For example, in the
West, we draw on romanticist notions of the self when we speak of our “soul” and modernist notions when we talk of finding our “true” self. Our interpretation and embodiment of available cultural scripts shapes our production of self. In this sense we do social order rather than simply reflect it (Wilkinson & Kitzenger, 2003) In this sense our self is culturally shaped or bound.

Bound, but not determined. Human beings are agentic, actively participating in our lives. We make choices about where to direct our attention and our physical activities. Our chosen activities make meaningful differences in our own lives, and in the lives of all of those we connect with (Mahoney, 2003). We engage creatively, through interaction and interpretation, with our environments. My use of creative engagement acknowledges that human activity and meaning making occurs in, and is heavily influenced by social-symbolic processes (Mahoney, 2003), and that these socio-symbolic processes have been, and are continuously, constituted through human activity. I work with a view of human agency as mediated, meaning all human activity occurs through language or conceptual tools that have been socially produced (Wertsch, 1991). We struggle to know, understand, and communicate with a language that is imbued with pre-given meanings (Bakhtin, 1981 as cited in Smith, 1999; Shotter, 1993; Shotter & Billig, 1997). Our talk holds this creative struggle.

While focusing on the central role of language in the self construction process and in mediating human agency, I also acknowledge embodiment and materiality. I reject the extreme versions of postmodernism or poststructuralism that subsume the self as text, locate agency exclusively in the linguistic, or ignore the impacts of the material world on human beings (Smith, 1999). Human beings are embodied, and the material world...
impacts us in very real ways. Examples of these impacts relevant to this study include our access to knowledge and resources, our physical movements in our own cities and across borders, and therefore, the options we have. Human beings, having mediated agency, creatively engage with an environment that includes pre-existing material conditions. We act and interpret our actions, using socially mediated tools and language, in a manner that constitutes our social world (Werstch, 1991).

_Perspectives on Gender and Sexualities_

Assumptions about the nature of gender and sexual orientation are made implicitly or explicitly in all research on sexual orientation or the experiences of QLGBs. Research and theory within a modernist paradigm has viewed both gender and sexual orientation as stable, dichotomous traits. Differences in gender and sexual orientation among human beings have been emphasized, dichotomized, and assumed to reflect innate or essential differences. An essentialized view of both gender and sexual orientation has been reinforced through the fusion of sex, gender, and gender roles in popular understandings of male and female sex. In a modernist perspective, identity is viewed as an expression of a person's essential nature and identity formation is seen as a developmental process whereby individuals come to gain awareness of, consciously recognize, accept, and reveal their true nature. Once realized and fully developed, a mature identity is assumed stable. Modernist notions of gender and sexual has, until recently, underpinned most mainstream psychological research, thereby contributing to the reification of binary notions of gender and sexual orientation.

My work is part of a small but growing body of research within psychology that seeks to supplant the discipline's reliance on and reinforcement of gender and sexual
orientation as stable ontological categories, and instead develop an understanding of
gender and sexualities as mutable, and plural (Diamond, 1998; Eliason, 1996; Peplau &
Garnets, 2001; Rust, 1993; Wilkenson & Kitzenger, 2003). Postmodern (Foucault, 1978)
and queer theory (Butler, 1993, 1996, 1999) have been useful in challenging binary
conceptions of gender and sexualities, generating a broad body of scholarship in the
social sciences exploring the social construction and mutability of gender and sexualities
and identity (see Weston; 1998 for a discussion). Rather than a single developmental
process, identity and identification is an on-going process whereby genders and
sexualities are enacted. Our gender and sexualities are something we do or produce
rather than are. We continually reproduce our gender and sexuality in our interactions
with others. Yet, these enactments of gender and sexualities will not be identically
reproduced. Rather, performances will vary in interaction with each new context (De
Castell & Bryson, 1998; Wilkenson & Kitzenger, 2003). Gender and sexual
identification are paradoxical processes: we are constantly trying to fix or stabilize
identities that are in perpetual flux.

The co-existence of these two very different paradigms within the psychology
literature has been a challenge in my review of the literature on gender and QLGB
sexualities. The discipline has been characterized by both extraordinary movement and
lag in its research paradigms (Harre & Gillet, 1994). This paradox is very apparent in the
psychological research on gender and QLGB sexualities, and my review of the literature
encompasses both the flux and foundation present in the discipline.

To be useful in counselling psychology research and practice, an understanding of
genders and sexualities as mutable and multiple needs to be more fully explored in the
context of women's everyday lives. A small but growing body of empirical research within psychology aims to address this gap (Golden, 1996; Rust, 1996, 2000; Sykes, 1996; Thompson; Bryson, & de Castell, 2001; Wilkinson & Kitzenger, 2003). By bringing this lens to this investigation I aim to enrich psychological research on QLGB sexualities. QLGB women who have immigrated have navigated profound shifts in social context and in their narratives reflect on the mutability of their sexual self in different contexts. An investigation of their immigration narratives enables an exploration of the tacit and explicit meanings women have made of these disruptions, discontinuities, and multiple potentialities.

Although postmodern and queer theory perspectives on gender and sexualities offer an important critique and valuable tools for understanding cultural, historical and linguistic contributors to gender and sexualities, I qualify my use of this perspective. Several aspects of the approach, as exemplified by Butler's work (1993, 1996, 1999), are inconsistent with a view of construction of self/identity as a valuable, agentic process. Although understanding gender and sexualities as processes with multiple and mutable potentials, could create possibilities for agentic self construction, conceptualizing gender and sexualities exclusively as enactments of cultural and aesthetic performances, as Butler argues (1993), can effectively undermine this agency. I am wary of the tendency in some queer theory to subsume the subject entirely into the discursive by discussing people exclusively as textual or cultural phenomenon (Deveaux, 1994; Glick, 2003). The danger is doing so lies in taking mutability and plurality to the extremes of endless fragmentation or pastiche. At this extreme, we become unreflexive mimics of deceptive discourses, tricked into creating irrelevant identities. Deveaux (1993) offers a feminist
critique of Butler's reliance on Foucault, arguing that his view of sexual identity ignores important ways individuals perceive and creatively inhabit their own identities, and creatively construct a self/identity and the community to support it. An uncritical use of Butler and Foucault's work on sexual identity can also overlook that human's are able to reflect on and understand the impacts of oppressions on their lives (Deveaux, 1993; Burkitt, 1998). Finally, describing oppressions, and resistance, in purely textual terms, can erase the material impact of oppressive practices and neglect the resistance in everyday acts (Burkitt, 1998) as well as the transformative power of people working through collective action (Deveaux, 1993).

In this investigation I have been challenged to find and work with a perspective on gender and sexualities that conceptualizes the mutually constitutive role of social forces, while also recognizing the human agency, and value, in constructing self or identity. I am proposing a weaving of constructivist, queer, and sociocultural feminist approaches to address this challenge. A constructivist psychological perspective of self provides an understanding of the process and value of constructing self and identity that acknowledges the on-going interface of human beings and their social world. Aspects of queer theory elaborate on the mutability and multiple potentialities of gender and sexualities. A feminist sociocultural perspective grounds this in the everyday, embodied experiences of women, and elaborates on ways that these experiences are constituted by the sociocultural context, including the impact of oppressions.

To realize this weave, I have drawn on the work by sociocultural psychologist Werstch (1991), feminist sociocultural theorist Smith (1999), social constructionist and constructivist scholars in psychology (Arvay, 2003; Gardiner & Bell, 1998; Harre &
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Gillet, 1994; Shotter & Billig, 1998) who work with dialogical and discursive approaches integrating the work of G.H. Mead, L. Vygotsky and M. Bahktin. Qualitative research by both QLGB researchers of gender and sexualities (Thompson, Bryson & De Castell, 2001; Wilkinson & Kitzenger, 2003), and by social constructivist researchers of self (Wortham, 1999) have applied this dialogical approach to research the socially mediated agentic use of language to construct self and identity in a manner that values this process.

In this study, I use the construct sexual self, and for my participants a QLGB sexual self, to refer to the self we continuously construct and enact around our embodied experience of gender and sexuality. The sexual self, like the heterogenous self (Whortham, 1999) is an on-going process that has multiple levels of contributors and multiple potentialities. In this study I focus on its dialogical construction through our interactions with others. I elaborate on this approach in the next chapter.

Women’s Immigration Experiences: Context, Race and Ethnicity, Gender, Sexualities

Social scientists across a range of disciplines have taken an interest in migration and the experience of immigrants. From this research we understand some of the psychological processes that occur with cultural relocation: the profound sense of disorientation, the experience of loss and grieving, the development of ethnic minority (Sue, 1995) or bicultural identity (Poston, 1990), and the reconstruction of self in the new culture. Migration represents a profound interruption in an individual’s life-course, entailing the loss of familiar sources of meaning and validation, and necessitating the construction of new ones (Espin, 1996).

In this section, I review literature on women’s immigration experiences and discuss their relevance to understanding how women who immigrate to Canada as part of
a same-sex couple reconstitute their self in their new context. This review gives greatest attention to recent qualitative research on women’s immigration experiences (Dossa, 2000; Dyck & McClaren, 2000; Espin, 1996, 1997, 1999). These studies identify issues central to the immigration experiences of women: contextual influences, race and ethnicity, and gender. Perhaps because sexuality has traditionally been considered private, there has been limited research attention given to the impact of migration on women’s sexualities (Alguijay, 1997; Dyck & McClaren, 2000; Espin, 1996, 1997, 1999). Among these researchers only Espin has conducted qualitative inquiry into the specific experiences of lesbian and bisexual immigrant women. She found that her participants shared some of the same experiences, challenges, and issues that their heterosexual counterparts do (Espin, 1999), however, lesbian and bisexual women’s unique experiences of constructing a sexual self based on a stigmatized sexuality in a new culture, and of negotiating multiple sources of oppression —immigrant status, racism, sexism and heterosexism—have not received adequate research attention. I discuss issues raised in the research concerning contextual influences, ethnicity, gender, and sexualities highlighting ways that these issues may be relevant to the experiences of QLGB women who immigrate to Canada using the H&C same-sex partner process. 

Context

In an effort to create more meaningful accounts of immigrant women’s experiences researchers have identified a number of important contextual influences. These influences contribute to differences that may be obscured by the broad category of *immigrant women*. Although not discrete or linear, these influences can be roughly organized under the context of exit, the actual immigration process, and the context of
arrival. Exit influences include the sociopolitical climate the women left: whether women experienced trauma in conjunction with war or political repression, the motivation for leaving, whether women were able to influence the decision to leave, and their involvement in planning and preparation to leave (Espin, 1999). Because the context of exit shapes women’s immigration experience QLGB women’s immigration stories that begin in their home country prior to their decision to leave are the focus of this study. The present study will explore women’s stories for important elements of their context of exit. I raise the possibility that for women who immigrate to be with their same-sex partners, important elements of their context of exit may include the values around women’s sexualities and QLGB sexualities in their home country, as well as oppressions and invisibility.

The process women use to immigrate, as an independent skilled worker, a dependent family member, or refugee, has potential long-term implications. For example, entering as a family member or spouse can reinforce or intensify women’s dependency on their sponsor. In contrast, those that enter alone as independents must document that their work qualifications and experience meet stringent criteria (Canadian Immigration Act, 1982, 2002). The points system restricts access to immigration under this category to those with formal education in designated occupations. Thus, those women who are admissible under these criteria will have had, in the application process, some practical preparation for seeking employment in Canada. For independent immigrants the process creates the expectation that their skills and qualifications are recognized in Canada. Yet, this is often not the case. Despite their qualifications and
skills, most immigrating women face years of retraining or volunteer work to establish qualifications and experience recognized in Canada.

The present study investigates women’s experience of an immigration process that gave them covert recognition; it was publicly invisible, relied on the discretionary power of individual immigration officers and yet, for many partners, was effective. To use this process, the immigrating partner applied under the independent skilled worker category and then requested consideration on H&C grounds. Applying under the independent skilled worker category, the immigrating partner was required to document her work qualifications and skills. For H&C consideration, the partners must provide evidence, including corroborating letters from friends and family, of the long-term and committed nature of their relationship. Because same-sex partnerships were not, until June 28, 2002, recognized under the family class, the Canadian partner did not have the same financial obligation to support a partner as sponsors do. The impact of settling under these conditions of hidden decisions and ambiguous terms is not known.

In the process of applying to immigrate, women must interact with an impersonal and discriminatory bureaucracy that holds ultimate decision-making power over their ability to settle in Canada with their partner. The process both enables and constrains, permits and restricts, in a manner that appears uniform and impersonal but that is, in practice, uneven and discriminatory. How smoothly an applicant moves through the process is very much affected by how closely the relationship resembles a model relationship based on heterosexual marriage: Have applicants lived together? Are they monogamous? Are they close in age? Are their finances linked? Discrimination on the basis of third world status, economic class, and race all enter into how an individual
applicant moves through the immigration process. The meanings women make of the process of explaining and proving their relationship to an anonymous immigration officer under these conditions, was examined as well as how the experience of engaging with this process shaped women’s sense of their self as they settle in Canada.

Finally, attention must be paid to elements of the context of arrival. The presence and nature of an existing co-national community and the degree of support for immigrants, or rejection by the dominant culture have been identified as important influences on women’s immigration experiences (Espin, 1999). Clearly, all of these issues are relevant to QLGB women who immigrate to Canada and there are likely other important elements that have yet to be identified. To my knowledge, no research exists on how QLGB immigrant women make meaning of this complex web of contextual influences. For example, the values around sexuality, QLGB sexualities, and marriage within co-national communities, immigration support services and wider communities may significantly shape women’s experiences. Ways that women encounter both support and rejection around their QLGB sexualities, culture, race /ethnicity, and language may shape their experiences and self. Therefore, it will be important to give attention to the elements of their context of entry that women describe in their narratives.

The significance of context of exit, process, and context of entry to women’s immigration experiences lends support to my decision to ask women to relay three parts of the women’s life-stories: their story of recognizing and acting on their attraction to women in their home country, their story of deciding to come to Canada and applying as a same-sex partner, and their story of creating a life in Canada. In constructing their personal narratives, women relate how they have interpreted and engaged with their
social world, including their interactions with significant social institutions such as immigration policies. In telling their stories they construct their interpretation of how they were enabled and constrained by their social and cultural context.

Race and Ethnicity

An understanding of the ways that immigrant and refugee women of colour have been constructed as an “Other” in Canadian society (Bannerji, 1995; Mohanty, 1991; Ng, 1988) is critical to understanding the context that women are coming into when they relocate to Canada. The construction of immigrant/third world women has occurred in the context of official multiculturalism and a normative Whiteness assumed within “Canadianness” (Bannerji, 2000). In the Canadian socio-political landscape, a number of identity categories have been created loosely based on the soupy concoction of ethnicity, national origin, and sometimes citizenship status: the immigrant/third world woman (Ng, 1993), the visible minority woman (Carty & Brand, 1993), the Asian woman, and the woman of colour. These are just some of the ways of constructing ethnicity that a woman settling in Canada may encounter. We know very little about how lesbian women’s negotiation of identity categories such as immigrant/third world women, visible minority women, Asian women, women of colour, or White women, shapes their experiences of settling in Canada nor how it constitutes how they construct their sexual self in Canada. Women’s constructions of their race/ethnicity and culture in their narratives, and the connections they make among race/ethnicity, culture and their QLGB sexualities were explored in the interpretive process.

A deficiency discourse exists around the socially constructed category of immigrant/third world women (Mohanty, 1991; Ng, 1988). This discourse has
constructed the immigrant woman of colour as someone who lacks skills and does not speak English. She is assumed to be passive, oppressed, and homebound. Her expected role in society is limited to service recipient or low-skilled labourer. In some versions of the discourse, she is viewed as a drain or burden on the system (Ng, 1993). Frequently, the discourse locates the source of the women’s disadvantaged position in problems within the host culture rather than question exclusionary and racist practices in Canadian society (Dossa, 2001). For example, lack of assertiveness or sexism of the home culture are criticized and emphasized whereas discriminatory hiring practices within Canada are overlooked or minimized.

Producing knowledge around women’s immigration experiences that does not simply reinforce this deficiency discourse and instead presents a view of women’s efforts to actively construct new lives for themselves enriches understanding of immigrating women’s lives. This challenge points to the need for richly contextualized research on women’s immigration experiences (Dossa, 2001). Narratives of immigration experiences create a deeper appreciation of the context of women’s lives both in their home country and the new country that challenge singular causal accounts of disadvantage. Within narratives, I attend to ways that women interact with power in the form of social institutions and how they engage with current discourses around immigrant women and discrimination. By reading narratives for themes of both self construction and themes of engagement with power and oppression, I create a view of QLGB women who immigrate that acknowledges the ways that their lives are shaped by these forces and the ways that they actively engage with these forces.

Gender
With greater research attention, the invisibility of women in the immigration literature was challenged in the 1980s. In the last decade, researchers have come to recognize and document ways in which the experience of dislocation and resettlement for immigrants is gendered (Dion & Dion, 2001; Dyck & Mclaren, 2002; Espin, 1999). In the process of constructing lives in their new country, women engage with changing interpretive schema around the gender woman (Dion & Dion, 2001) and navigate new possible ways of being women (Dyck & Mclaren, 2002; Espin, 1999). Theorizing gender as a socially situated on-going production, it follows that women’s enactment of gender changes, through necessary repetition, reinvention, and reorganization, in interaction with their new contexts.

To learn about the ways that girls and women reconstitute themselves, researchers have looked at their performance of identity through behaviour, clothing, speech, and personal stories (Dyck & Mclaren, 2002). Attending to the language women and girls used to perform their identity when telling their stories has enriched the analysis of these personal narratives. For example, Dyck and McLaren noted the use of Canadian idioms and slang among immigrant girls. Espin (1999) asked women to reflect on their language preference for discussing their lives in their new country, their sexuality, and during intimacy as an indicator of bicultural or monocultural identities. Recognizing the significance that subtle shifts in language can have, I have chosen to use a method of transcription (Gee, 1986; Reissman, 1993) that by arranging text into phrases and stanzas, more closely reflects spoken language.

Research on the impact of migration on women’s sense of self has identified a number of themes or issues that may be present in the narratives of participants in the
Challenges to self that have emerged as themes in immigrant women's narratives are isolation, invisibility, and discrimination. A sense of continuity of self may be challenged by the erasure of competencies or experience from their home communities (Dossa, 2001). The women in Espin's research (1999) spoke often of loss and grieving of their former self. Espin raised concerns that in focusing on the process of adaptation to the new country, immigration researchers may have overlooked the deep and pervasive impact of loss for immigrants. Many of the women in Espin's studies held a phenomenology of ever-present comparisons and questions of what might have been had they not left their home country. These themes were explored in the process of interpreting the women's stories of immigrating through the H&C process for same-sex partners.

**Sexualities**

Research on the impact of migration on women's sexualities is limited. Research into immigration, influenced by the priorities of government and settlement organizations, has tended to focus on immigrant adaptation in areas of employment and education (Dossa, 2001; Espin, 1999). This dearth of research attention may also reflect beliefs, rooted in our Victorian past, about the private nature of sexuality, ignoring the publicly performed and socially constructed nature of sexualities. Finally, the topic is a taboo one in many cultures, and therefore may be very difficult to investigate effectively.

The few studies I have located on women's sexualities where immigrant women were the focus examined some of the ways that immigrant girls and women face the challenge of navigating a myriad of conflicting discourses around women's sexualities. Women's self construction occurs within family, community, and social contexts where
girls and women's femininity, womanliness, and sexual behaviour are observed, scrutinized, and controlled (Dyck & McLaren, 2001; Espin, 1999). High school girls with a range of immigration experiences were interviewed by Dyck and McLaren (2001). They reflected on the different kinds of attention and messages they received about their femininity and sexualities from classmates of different cultures, from their own cultural community members, and from family members. The girls' mothers were also interviewed. Dyck and McLaren noted that although some mothers in their study were willing to renegotiate freedom and control around many issues, including reworking parental authority, they were most deeply worried and less willing to negotiate on issues around sexual behaviour. Espin (1999) noted that in some immigrant communities women's sexual purity was viewed as a barometer of a family's morality and honour and thus subjected to more stringent control than young men's sexual behaviour in the same communities. Among service providers and within immigrant communities discourse on the preservation of cultural values often implicitly centres on women's sexualities (Dyck & McLaren, 2001). Again, narratives are useful research tools for not only identifying the discourses that women draw on, but also how they interpret and engage with them. Awareness of some of these issues immigrating women face attuned how I listened to women's stories.

Only two researchers have dealt specifically with the experiences of immigrant women who have relationships with women or identify as QLGB (Alquijay, 1997; Espin, 1996; 1998; 1999). Alquijay conducted a quantitative analysis of the relationships among self-esteem, acculturation, and lesbian identity formation in 92 Latina lesbians comprising a diversity of immigration statuses. Her study highlighted the need for better
understanding of the relationships of ethnicity, gender, and sexualities for clinicians to draw on. A limitation of her study that she identified was that in most cases the instruments available were inadequate for the complexity of the constructs she was trying to measure.

Espin (1999) conducted individual interviews and focus groups with women in two West coast and one midwestern large urban centres in the United States. She sought out lesbian and bisexual participants using community networking. Participants were from a number of different countries and had a wide range of migration histories. This plurality of experience was used effectively by Espin to identify significant factors in women’s experiences. For example, her sample included women who had identified as lesbian in their home countries as well as those who did not identify as lesbian until arriving in the United States. She noted the impact this had on women’s sense of compatibility between their ethno-cultural and sexual identities. Women who had not constructed a lesbian, or lesbian-like, sexual identity or acknowledged their feelings for women in their home country described a great deal of dissonance in their sense of their ethno-cultural and sexual selves.

In the present study, I focused on women who used the same immigration process, allowing for more focused attention on the immigration process. In addition, I have focused on women who have, in some way, acted on their attraction to women in their home country, giving them a biculturally informed perspective of their QLGB sexualities. Other differences, such as context of exit, age, and age of recognizing same-sex attraction were noted and explored in the interpretation process. Because of the diversity of the four women’s experiences and backgrounds, a narrative method was used
that allows each woman's story to remain whole and in context rather than a method that
expects an essential core structure or experience to emerge (Reissman, 1993).

When speaking about their sexualities, the women in Espin's study reflected on
their choice of language for describing themselves and for emotional and sexual
intimacy. Espin (1999) noted that language seemed to provide a window into the
presence of monocultural or bicultural sexual orientations. Many women reported that
they actually found speaking about their sexualities in English more comfortable than in
their first language. Women who had come out after arriving in the United States lacked
a vocabulary of self-expression of sexuality in their first language, whereas women who
had come out in their home countries and then moved were able to reflect on the
difference in the vocabulary of the two languages' around sexuality. Espin's exploration
of how women language their sexual self is a useful one. However, I question whether
language should be understood as transparent reflection of cognitive processes or the
presence of cultural identity. Language use is always situated in a particular context for a
particular purpose. Although I was attentive to issues of language use, I understand
language use as a contextually mediated performance, rather than as transparent evidence
of particular cognitions or schema.

Espin (1999) theorized, and found, parallels in the coming out process and the
cultural adaptation process. Both coming out and cultural relocation are major events
requiring revision of the life-story, disassembling, and reassembling social networks, and
acculturation to new norms, expectations, and roles. Both processes can involve an
element of loss; loss of connection to people with shared values; loss of anticipated future
selves; and loss of social validation or status. In the present study, I explored ways that
the women's stories both conformed and deviated from previously theorized processes of either coming out or cultural adaptation.

In the present study, I aim to contribute to the sparse literature on QLGB women within immigration studies. In doing so I explore connections among immigration, an experience recognized as gendered in existing research, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity in the self construction process. I aim to create richly detailed and contextualized texts of the life-stories of women who have engaged with oppressive social forces and institutions, attending to ways they interpret this engagement, as they reconstitute their self in their new context.

*Conceptualizing Women's QLGB Sexualities*

Beyond documenting the stories of a group of women who have been largely overlooked in social science immigration research, I see potential for these narratives to challenge existing psychological models of sexual identity formation and provide the richly contextualized description needed to begin the construction of new conceptualizations of women's sexualities. There is growing dissatisfaction with existing conceptualizations of women's QLGB sexualities among researchers and theorists (Eliason, 1993; McCarn & Fassinger, 1997; Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Rust 1993). Existing models rest on essentialized and dichotomized notions of identity and have been built primarily from gay men's experiences. There is a need to construct new paradigms grounded in research and sensitive to the complexity and reality of women's lives. Recent research on women's sexual orientation challenges these models and draws attention to aspects of women's sexualities that are not recognized in existing conceptualizations (Eliason, 1993; Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Rust 1993). In this section, I
examine existing studies of Women's QLGB sexualities and discuss current research efforts to better describe the diversity and complexity of women's formation of QLGB sexualities. I identify both weaknesses in existing conceptualizations, and issues in need of more focused research attention as part of an effort to develop richer understandings of women's sexualities. I then discuss the potential for narratives of women who have immigrated to Canada as same-sex partners to enrich our understanding of women's sexualities and offer insight into two areas needing greater research attention.

Early theories of sexual orientation identity development consisted of stage models conceptualizing movement from non-awareness through assumption of a homosexual identity. Both Cass (1979) and Troiden (1988) posited identical identity formation processes for gay men and lesbian women. According to Cass the challenge of creating congruence between personal perception, personal behaviour, perception of other people's attitudes, and self-identity propels the coming out process. She viewed the process as linear, consisting of six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. Troiden (1988) hypothesized a process whereby people spiral along four stages: sensitization, confusion, identity assumption, and commitment. Movement back and forth within stages as well as up or down is possible.

Both of these models are cited frequently and have significantly shaped psychological views of lesbian identity in research and practice. Unfortunately, only Cass's model has been validated with women (Cass 1984; Kahn, 1991). Troiden developed his model based on a review of existing literature and the model appears not to have been empirically validated with women (Eliason, 1996). Cass validated her model
with 109 men and 69 women she recruited through gay and lesbian centres and the
snowballing technique. Her efforts to validate her model are admirable but suffer from
several limitations. First, participants were asked to select a category that best described
them and then answer a questionnaire. The high correlation (97%) between self-selected
categories and the questionnaire responses may be related to the similarity in language of
the descriptions of the categories and the questions. Second, participants were forced to
select only one category. The 12 participants that were unable to select only one (6 men,
6 women) were dropped from the study. This omission is problematic in that it creates
an artificially inflated correlation and deletes evidence against the model’s external
validity. Finally, by using a cross sectional rather than a longitudinal design, Cass (1984)
was unable to validate the sequencing of her stages. When Cass’s model was examined
for sequencing the single linear sequence was not supported (Kahn, 1991).

In hypothesizing a common coming out experience for both gay men and
lesbians, early research on sexual orientation identity obscured differences between
men’s and women’s experiences thereby neglecting key elements of women’s sexual
identity formation process. More recent research focused specifically on women’s sexual
identity development (Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Diamond; 1998; Kahn, 1991;
McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Peplau & Garnets, 1999, 2000; Rust; 1993; Sophie, 1986)
and has identified key elements of QLGB women’s sexualities that have been overlooked
because gay male experiences were assumed to apply to women as well.

First, the fluidity of women’s sexualities has not been given adequate attention.
There is ample evidence that many women experience their sexualities as mutable. Many
women experience changes in their sexualities over time. Researchers have documented
the experiences of married heterosexual women who later took women partners (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995) as well as women who identified as lesbian and later began relationships with men (Bart, 1993). There is some evidence that women’s sexuality is characterized by greater fluidity or plasticity than men’s (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Coming out in midlife after identifying as heterosexual appears to be more common among women than men (McCann & Fassinger, 1996). Pre-adolescent experiences common among gay men such as fascination with same-gender peers and subjective feelings of being different (Chapman & Brannock, 1993) that reinforce a sense of continuity in sexual identity do not appear to be as common among lesbians or bisexual women. Research paradigms of women’s sexuality need to recognize that sexual self construction is an on-going process and accommodate the fluidity and mutability of women’s experiences of their sexualities.

Relational aspects of women’s sexualities have not been incorporated adequately into current research or theory. Models have tended to focus on coming out as an independent process of realizing and acting on sexual desire (Fassinger & Morrow, 1995) rather than as a relational process of defining self in relation to others. In doing so they may be missing important aspects of the process both for women and men. Women are more likely than men to come out in the context of an emotionally intimate non-sexual relationship with a woman. In contrast, they are not as likely as men to have experimented sexually with same-sex partners prior to questioning their identity (Fassinger & Morrow, 1995).

In focusing on the individual’s developmental process, researchers have given inadequate attention to sociocultural context. For example, for many women the process
of identifying as lesbian or bisexual is connected to a changing awareness and identification as women or as feminists. These influences are not given adequate attention in models that combine the experiences of men and women (Schneider, 1989).

Not only are differences between men and women obscured by these coming out models, variability within women's experience is also lost. Research focusing specifically on women's experiences suggests there is greater variability among women's experiences than current models can accommodate. When women are asked to report their experience, rather than to identify their location in a model, multiple paths emerge (Diamond, 1998; Eliason, 1996; Rust, 1993; Sophie, 1986). Rust studied 346 lesbian and 60 bisexual women who were surveyed about the ages when they experienced certain key milestones or psychological events such as first recognizing same-sex desire or first same-sex sexual experience. When average ages of each milestone were compared a picture of a linear process emerged. However, when women's individual experiences were examined a great deal of variability became apparent. With the exception of "questioning my sexual orientation" (Rust, 1993, p.59) there was no event that all of the women had experienced. The order and elapsed time between milestones also varied. Although stage models make allowances for some individual variation by stating that individuals might return to or skip steps, an underlying linear pattern with a single end-point is assumed and variations from this are seen as deviations. More recent research on lesbians and bisexual women suggest that variability is the norm (Diamond, 1998; Rust, 1993). To accommodate multiple paths and multiple configurations, efforts to conceptualize women's sexualities must give greater attention to the on-going process whereby women construct their sexuality. The present study gives attention to these
multiple paths by using a narrative approach that allows the plurality of women's sexualities to remain in focus.

The development of a mature bisexual identity is a potential overlooked by stage models (Cass, 1979, 1984; Troiden; 1988). In these approaches, bisexuality was viewed as an intermediate step towards an authentic lesbian identity or as failure to fully accept a lesbian identity. More recent research focusing on bisexual identity formation, prompted in part by greater activism and visibility of bisexuals within gay and lesbian communities, has challenged these assumptions (Diamond, 1998; Rust, 1993). Although the process of creating a coherent bisexual identity is complicated by invisibility and marginality both within straight and QLGB communities, at any given time, bisexual women are as certain of their identity as lesbian women (Rust, 1993). The reported behaviour and attractions of bisexual women and lesbians do not differ significantly (Diamond, 1998; Rust, 1993), the difference lies in the meanings they make and the labels they choose. This fact points to both the limitations of language for describing sexualities and the importance of paying attention to what language is available to women as they construct their sexualities.

Researcher dissatisfaction with current psychological paradigms of women's sexualities have led to a call to revise and refocus research efforts to bring more attention to these aspects of women's sexuality. Researchers Peplau and Garnets (1999, 2000) have identified the need for rich description and extensive mapping of the experiences of women both in Western cultures and around the globe as an essential first step in creating a research paradigm for women's sexuality that can accommodate the fluidity and variability of women's experiences and that conceptualizes the relational and contextual
aspects of sexualities. Similarly, Eliason (1999) has suggested drawing on women’s own personal accounts of sexual identity formation. Therefore, in the present study I propose to explore women’s personal stories of identity formation. How do women understand fluidity or changes in their sexual self? How do they draw on relationships? How do they understand elements of their context?

Much of the existing research on sexual orientation identity within psychology has dealt with sexual orientation in isolation of other identities (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). Drawing participants largely from White, urban, Euro-American backgrounds, this research has constructed a culturally encapsulated view of QLGB sexualities. In this literature, failure to examine Whiteness as an ethnicity has allowed the experience of White lesbians to be presented as the model or norm for all lesbians. This narrow perspective is inadequate for understanding ways in which sexualities and race/ethnicities mutually constitute each other.

All models to date posit a beginning point of “non-awareness” of both personal sexual orientation and of existence of lesbian or bisexuals as a group. A uniform notion of non-awareness belies the wide range of possible values, beliefs, and practices that shape women’s sexual identity formation (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Constructs of gender and sexual orientation vary widely across cultures (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Jackson & Cook, 1999), shaping the construction of sexual orientation identity formation. The on-going process of constructing sexual orientation identity must be recognized as culturally embedded. The specific cultural, historical, and geographic communities in which women live will shape how they define, embody, and enact their sexualities.
Research driven by conceptualizations of sexual orientation that fail to incorporate ethnicity or consider multiple identities has limited our understanding of the experience of belonging to both sexual and racial or ethnic minorities in North America. Much of the research in North America on sexual orientation identity has focused on disclosure and openness about sexual orientation as a sign of a mature sexual identity (Cass 1979; Troiden, 1988). However, research in Asian countries (Jackson & Cook, 1999) and accounts from lesbian and bisexual women who are members of racial/ethnic minorities in North America (Chan, 1997; Espin, 1996; Fukayama & Ferguson, 2000) call this emphasis into question. QLGB women of colour suggest that their choices to disclose are influenced by the need to maintain a social support network within their racial or ethnic communities (Chan, 1997; Espin, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). For these women, having limited contexts where both racial/ethnic identity and lesbian/bisexual identity are validated significantly shapes the identity formation process (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). In an effort to address this problem McCarn and Fassinger (1996) proposed a model that did not treat openness and activism as components of self-acceptance. Instead, they recommended viewing sexual orientation identity formation as two separate but mutually catalytic identification processes: individual identification and group membership identification. Thus, researchers must step out of culturally encapsulated views of self, identity, and sexual orientation and recognize women's cultural contexts in order to understand the identity formation process of QLGB women of colour.

Oppressions are not experienced separately. Racism is gendered and sexualized, and sexism and heterosexism are racialized (Yue, 1999). Just as sexual orientation and
ethnic identity formation cannot be viewed as two separate and layered processes, concepts of layered oppressions like “double jeopardy” or “triple jeopardy” are not adequate for understanding the experience of oppression for QLGB women of colour (Takagi, 1997). The racism experienced by a heterosexual Asian man—stereotyped as asexual or immasculine— is qualitatively different than the racism experienced by a gay Asian man exoticized as a “boy-toy” for “rice queens”. One stereotype denies a sexual aspect of the self the other exaggerates and distorts the sexual. Both are clearly prejudiced, but the impact on identity of these two stereotypes is different. The significance of oppressions to identity formation should not be understated, however, nor should the “management” of oppression or multiple oppressions be assumed to encompass the entire identity formation process (Eliason, 1996).

The narratives of women who have immigrated to be with their same-sex partner have the potential to explore two of the critical gaps in current psychological paradigms of sexual orientation. First, more attention needs to be given to the mutable, relational, and situated quality of women’s sexualities in psychological research. Second, sexual orientation identity formation must be conceptualized in a manner that acknowledges multiple identities and multiple oppressions.

**Conclusion**

Women who have immigrated to Canada to be with their same-sex partners have forged a life-path from which we as researchers in psychology and counsellors can learn a great deal. We have virtually no understanding of how immigration shapes women’s sexual self, and know even less about this process for QLGB women. Further, although the mutable, relational, contextualized, qualities of women’s sexualities has been
acknowledged in some psychological research, we do not know how these qualities are understood and lived by women in their everyday lives. We also have not explored women's constructions of their sexuality given the multiple identities we all embody and the multiple oppressions many women, including QLGB women who immigrate, engage with. In the present study, I aim to address these gaps by exploring connections among immigration, gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity in the narratives of women who have immigrated to Canada as part of a same sex couple. I open my inquiry broadly with the question: How do women who have immigrated to Canada as part of a same-sex couple narrate their experience. Viewing narrative as a key process whereby people construct their self allows me to extend this question to: How do these women construct their self? I am interested in particular in how women construct their sexual self while recognizing that the sexual self is constitutive of and by other selves. Within their self construction process I attend in particular to relationships, context, and their engagement with oppressive social relationships, practices and institutions by asking two further questions: How do women interpret relationships and their social context in their construction of sexual self? How do women interpret and engage with oppression and power?
Chapter 3

NARRATIVE INQUIRY: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

When QLGBT share our "coming out" stories, we are sharing our stories of transformation—of vulnerability and courage, fear and triumph, confusion and insight. With elements of war stories, heroic journeys, and romances, coming out stories have emerged within many QLGBT communities as a cultural practice shared by groups of friends and as a genre recorded in anthologies. Forming and telling the story of our personal transformation is a rite of passage for the teller, and a source of validation for both the teller and the listener. We recognize common bonds through our stories and at the same time learn about the complexity and diversity of our experiences. My experience of the richness and transformative potential of stories drew me to narratives as a site and method of inquiry. As a volunteer at monthly LEGIT information meetings, I was hearing the stories of struggle and success of other QLGB partners using the same-sex H&C process. I saw the potential for these stories to be sources of information, reflection, and inspiration for others.

The intuitive appeal of stories has been reinforced by a broad body of scholarship supporting narratives as a tool for researching identity, subjectivity, and construction of the self (Mishler, 1986; Reissman, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988). Humans are story-telling beings; we come to know ourselves, and our world through the stories we construct. We story our lives, organizing the flow of our experiences and the meanings we make of these events and actions into episodes (Reissman, 1993). These episodes are incorporated into personal narratives. Through on-going revision of these personal narratives we construct our selves. In telling these stories to others we are constructing our self; how we
know ourselves, and how we want to be known by others. In this manner, self, identity, and subjectivity are spoken through the narrative.

The stories we tell about ourselves function on a cultural level. We draw on shared cultural tales or meta-narratives to construct our stories. In this way, the culture of the teller is revealed in both the form and content of the narrative; their culture “speaks itself” (Riessman, 1993). Narratives hold the tacit cultural knowledge of the speaker (Arvay, 2003). Narratives may be presented to explain conformity to or divergence from culturally sanctioned life paths or meta-narratives. Exploring the cultural resources that the story teller draws on, creates a picture of the ways the teller uses, colludes with, resists, or subverts cultural expectations or dominant discourses.

Coming out stories are one such meta-narrative in circulation among QLGBT communities in North America and, to some extent transnationally through websites and QLGBT organizations. I have drawn on coming out stories as the starting point for this chapter and for my choice of narratives as a research tool. What are the implications of this starting point? In North America, coming out stories have emerged as a genre and I am part of the community of listeners (Plummer, 1995). How has the metaphor of coming out shaped how we tell our stories? Coming out, as the name implies, prioritizes disclosure and open expression of sexual orientation as the resolution of the conflict in the story. It frames the conflict as individual vs. social expectations. Coming out stories can consolidate essentialized notions of gender and sexualities. Further, they often construct notions of a QLGBT community, a QLGBT imaginary, that is Western, urban, and White (Weston, 1998).
What does this mean for the stories of women coming from cultures with different constructions of gender and sexualities and different traditions, or perhaps no public tradition, around storying their sexuality? I use stories as a research tools, and my expectations of stories of sexuality have been shaped by hearing and reading coming out stories. Throughout the research process I have needed to continue to surface and reflect on my assumptions about stories of sexuality.

After outlining the purpose, question and objectives that guide my research, I outline the approach to narrative analysis I have chosen, the collaborative narrative method (Arvay, 2003). I discuss the epistemology of the approach, describe the process I have followed, and the concepts of validity I am using.

**Research Purpose and Question**

We have much to learn from the experiences of women who have immigrated to Canada in order to settle with their same-sex partners. Interwoven in these women’s experiences are several issues in need of focused research attention and revised conceptualizations in psychology. We know very little of how the experience of immigrating shapes women’s constructions of their sexual self, and even less about this process for women in same-sex relationships. Integral to this process is an understanding of how women negotiate multiple selves and multiple oppressions when they construct their sexual self. In addition to documenting the stories of a group of women overlooked by current immigration and sexual orientation research in psychology, studying these narratives has the potential to enrich our understanding of several issues that have received scant research attention: ways migration shapes lesbian women’s construction of sexual self, ways lesbian immigrant women negotiate multiple subject positions and
multiple oppressions in constructing their self, and more broadly ways that women interpret their social contexts in constructing their sexual self.

The narratives of women who have immigrated to Canada using the same-sex couple immigration process tell stories of their experiences of living QLGB sexualities in two different cultural contexts, of their engagement with an impersonal and discriminatory bureaucracy, and the process of constructing a new life, and new self, in Canada. Very broadly, I have posed the research question: How do women who have immigrated to Canada using a H&C appeal based on their same-sex relationship narrate their experience? Viewing the telling of this narrative as a performance of self allows me to extend this question to ask: How do these women construct their self in their new context? In order to create a relational and contextual view of self construction I will ask: How do women interpret relationships and their social context in their construction of sexual self? And to explore ways that the personal and political are interrelated I ask: How do women interpret and engage with oppression and power?

Research Objectives

The goals for this research are theoretical, applied, and transformative. Current psychological theories of sexual orientation inadequately treat the processes whereby women construct QLGB sexual self given the mutually constituting roles of gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. Women’s narratives of living their sexualities in different contexts and relationships provides insight into some of the discursive processes whereby women construct a sexual self that acknowledges their multiple subject positions. A richer understanding of how women narratively construct their sexual self will inform current efforts within psychology to reconceptualize women’s sexual
orientation identity formation. The applied purpose of my research is to help organizations and individuals within the QLGBT communities and immigrant communities understand the experiences and needs of QLGB immigrants in Canada. Finally, I see my research and the lives of the women that I interview as part of what Plummer (1995) terms a new politics of intimate citizenship. Namely, I am concerned with ways that the social and political are implicated in the personal. Women immigrating to be with their same-sex partners are asserting not only legal and political rights but also asserting rights to build their own relationships and identity. Understanding how women are creating lives for themselves in the face of discriminatory institutions and practices is potentially transformational. Others may learn from their experience and see new possibilities.

**Collaborative Narrative Inquiry**

**Epistemology**

The collaborative narrative method developed by Arvay (2003) integrates constructivist, social constructionist, and narrative epistemologies. This approach allows inquiry into the construction of self through the social activity of narrating. Assuming that it is through on-going revision of the stories that we tell about ourselves that we construct self, this approach takes as its point of entry the conversational activity (Shotter, 1995) used to construct a narrative. In this study, the site of inquiry is the talk used to narrate their immigration experience.

Narrative self construction occurs in the emplotment and meaning making around significant events, and in the interaction between the teller and the listener. To
conceptualize the interactional self-construction process the collaborative narrative approach draws on Bakhtin’s notion of self-narrating and the self as a “polyphonic novel” (Bakhtin cited in Arvay, 2003; Shotter, 1995; Shotter & Billig, 1998). Each time we narrate part of our lives three parties are present in the narrative process: the speaker, the listener, and a third imagined “superaddressee” (Arvay, 2003) who is presumed to understand. Thus, three voices exist in the speech of the narrator: the understanding of the speaker, the presence of the recipient or listener, and the presumed other. It is interrelationship of these voices that creates a self that simultaneously emerges in the specific context while contributing to a continuity of self. The tensions of discontinuity and continuity, coherence and incoherence, unity and dispersion thus exist in the interactive performance of the self-narrative (de Peuter, 1998). It is the interactive performance of the self-narrative that is the site of inquiry.

Using the collaborative narrative approach, I understand of the act of storying as mediated action (Arvay, 2003; Wertsch, 1991). While constructing a narrative, the teller engages in a creative struggle to use language that is sediment with pre-given meanings, mean what she wants, in that particular setting (Smith, 1999). Utterances hold the speaker’s efforts, and it is this creative struggle that I seek to understand in my inquiry. 

Axiology.

I choose the collaborative narrative approach because it is consistent with my own research values and addresses specific concerns I had in conducting this research. My concern with issues of researcher power contributed to my choice of collaborative narrative inquiry. As a feminist and a lesbian I am sensitive to issues of misrepresentation by well-meaning researchers. I am not, however, immune to committing the same errors
myself. As a White, university educated, middle-class woman, and Canadian citizen I have a very different positionality than most of my participants. For this reason, I selected a method that gives participants a high degree of input into the interpretation process. The interpretive process outlined in this method requires and encourages a high degree of self-reflexivity in an effort to surface ways that I shape the interview, interpretation and presentation of texts. Given my aim of using this research to advocate for recognition and support for immigrating same-sex partners by community organizations it is all the more important that my interpretations do not stand alone as the sole voice of authority, that instead interpretations are dialogued and negotiated and my role as researcher explored (Lather, 1991).

When participants shared their stories with me they were constructing them specifically for me in the context of a research interview. How these women perceived me, potentially for example as a Canadian, a lesbian, a native English speaker, a graduate student researcher, and a fellow LEGIT member, shapes our interactions and their narratives as does their interpretation of the interview context. The collaborative narrative approach recognizes that all knowledge, including all stories, is situated and partial. The method incorporates researcher self-reflexivity as an integral part of the entire research process. Thus, part of my task in using this method has been to understand and make explicit my role in the interview, interpretation and writing process.

I have not viewed the decision to involve women in a collaborative interpretive process as a way of “giving voice” to participants. I have opened a space in the research process for women to use their own voice in a dialogue. The degree to which they did this depended, in part, on my ability to communicate openness to genuine collaboration.
Further, although I aimed to foster a dialogue that co-constructed the meaning of the interview text, I made decisions about how this co-construction was incorporated into the text. I own both the privilege and responsibility of creating the research question, setting the interview context, providing guidelines for interpretation, contributing my own interpretations, and making final decisions on how to present the research text. It is my voice that is privileged through the research and writing process. My challenge has been what to do with this privilege and how to explicate how I have used it. I discuss my role in the interpretation process and writing process later in this chapter. For each narrative, I provide self-reflexive commentary on the interview and interpretation process.

There is both positive and negative transformative potential inherent in the narrative interviewing process. My belief that the act of telling a story will impact the teller, shaping how she sees herself, has informed my decision to use a process that gives participants an opportunity to reflect on their own story and story-telling process. However, I want to clarify that in being explicit about the transformative potential in narratives, I am not setting out to liberate, emancipate, or raise the consciousness of the individual women who participate in this research. The women I am interviewing are already actively engaged in understanding themselves and in understanding and resisting oppression. My hope is that in writing about their engagement I have provided both a catalyst for others to further their own engagement and exemplars that open alternative possibilities for engagement.

The Process

I describe the recruitment and preparation for participants, briefly describe participant demographics, and then outline the collaborative narrative process. The
collaborative narrative process comprises seven stages: the reflexive preliminary conversation, the interview, transcription, collaborative reading, the interpretive interview, writing the story, and sharing the story (Arvay, 2003). I have created a chart outlining the process with the goals of each step, my role and task, and those of the participant/co-investigators (see Appendix A).

Recruitment and preparation

Participants in my study were recruited through the contact lists of LEGIT. After receiving ethics approval, I circulated an introductory letter (Appendix B) at monthly drop-ins and social events, including a ten-year anniversary party that serendipitously coincided with the beginning of the recruitment process. The LEGIT volunteer who keeps the contact list identified potential participants and left telephone messages with my contact information. Those women who contacted me were sent an introductory letter by e-mail. Six women responded, of these 5 met the criteria (i.e. she had immigrated to Canada using a H&C appeal grounds based on her relationship with a Canadian resident and had resided in Canada for at least one year.) By email and with a follow up phone call, I explained the collaborative interview process, the time commitment involved and the research question. In phone conversations, I stressed that women could choose to engage in as much or as little of the collaborative process as they chose to and had time for.

Participants/co-investigators

Four women, whom I identify by their chosen pseudonyms, agreed to meet for first interviews: Leslie, Cora, Gwen, and Suzanne. The women range in age from 27 to 43. Leslie and Cora are from Asian countries. Gwen and Suzanne are from European
countries. They have lived in Canada 8-10 years. The time between becoming permanent residents and the interview varied from 0-9 years. They are all university educated and speak at least two languages: Leslie and Gwen spoke English in their homes as children, Cora and Suzanne learned English as children in school. In their interviews they self-identified as: lesbian, dyke, queer, queer woman, and gay woman.

Cora, Gwen, and Leslie were able to participate in the full interview and joint interpretation process. Suzanne expressed concerns with the time commitment this process required. Rather than lose her participation in the study, we negotiated a shorter version of the process, meeting for the first interview only. As I describe the process Cora, Gwen, Leslie and I followed, I discuss variations in the process Suzanne and I used.

First meeting: Preliminary conversation.

The participants and I arranged a time and place for the first meeting by phone. I provided the participant with an outline of the three parts of their life-story that I was interested in: (a) her experience in her home country before immigration, specifically how she came to understand her attraction for women there, (b) how she immigrated, and (c) her experience of settling in Canada. I also provided a description of the collaborative process (Appendix C) and a copy of the informed consent (Appendix D) by email. This first meeting took 2.5 to 3.5 hours. The participants and I arranged meetings in mutually convenient locations where privacy and quiet could be assured. We used offices at the YWCA, one of the participant’s workplaces when the office was closed, or the participants’ homes.
The first meeting comprised the preliminary conversation and the narrative interview. I used the preliminary conversation as an opportunity to establish rapport and establish the basis for a collaborative relationship. I described my own interest in the research topic, detailing the roles and responsibilities of the researcher and co-investigator, by articulating my own beliefs concerning the research process and relationship, and by explaining the values underlying the collaborative narrative process. During this conversation we also discussed the informed consent. I described my view of the informed consent as being not only a document, but also an on-going process in which participants would work with me to ensure that their confidentiality was protected. To initiate this process, I began a list of details that would need to be omitted from transcripts and narratives and suggested that we would revise this list as needed. After the participant signed the informed consent, I asked if the participant was ready for audiotaping to begin. I emphasized that the participant could press pause at any time.

Interview

With the foundation for a collaborative relationship established, the research interview proceeded. In an initial interview with Leslie, I began by asking her about the terms she used to describe her sexuality and then invited her to tell the story of how she came to understand herself this way. However, I found this opening, instead of a narrative, invited an exploration of labeling and the difficulties of labeling rather than a narrative. For the remaining interviews, I chose to open by asking if the outline of the three parts of the life-story I had sent by email would work as a structure for our interview. We discussed how this structure would or would not fit for the interview, and I invited the first part of their story. Once women began their story my role was to listen
actively, to engage deeper exploration through reflections and sharing my own reactions to the story, and to remain aware of my role in the interaction and in the construction of the text. I worked to bring both experiential engagement and reflexive awareness into the dialogue with the co-investigator. As the co-investigator told her story, my aim was to be attuned to both the personal experience of the narrator and the cultural discourses in the narrative.

A few examples demonstrate how I brought this dual awareness into the interview. I commented on metaphors or figurative language women used, inviting them to explore the metaphor. At times, if I became aware that I shared an experience or reaction that the women were describing I would mention this, commenting briefly on my reaction and interpretation of the experience, and then invite her to comment on my interpretation. The purpose of this way of interacting with participants was to engage tacit knowledge and reflexivity on both our parts. The way that I attended to and dialogued with the women, and the extent to which I “injected” these reactions, varied considerably as I interpreted the women’s needs for different ways of attending, and as the interviewing process proceeded. I comment on the quality of the interaction with each of the women as I introduce their narratives in Chapter 4.

Listening and transcribing.

Several factors influenced my choice of transcription method. Awareness of the many forms narratives can take informed my decision to use a definition of narrative and transcription process that does not assume that narratives conform to a particular story grammar (Reissman, 1993; Gergen, 1997). Second, although no written text can exactly reflect spoken language I chose a method that follows, as closely as possible, spoken
language forms. I followed a method of transcription originally developed by Gee (1985, 1986, 1991), adapted, and documented by Reissman (1993) and incorporated into the collaborative narrative process by Arvay (2003). I used the conventions for listening and structuring the transcript into phrases and stanzas as outlined by Gee (1986) and Reissman (1993). I adapted the conventions for notation slightly in order to be able to work with the transcripts on the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti (version 4.2) (Muhr, scientific software development, 1998).

I used the audiotapes of the interview and notes I wrote about non-verbal aspects of the interaction after the interview to create a rough transcription that incorporated speech as well as non-verbal responses. While listening to the tape, I took special note of changes in tone, hesitations, pauses, and silence. These were displayed in the text using the following: .. for hesitations, : for false starts and clipped words, ... for pauses, (silence:time in seconds) for longer silences. I used capitals, rather than bold font, to indicate emphasized words because Atlas.ti does not support bold font. I used the comment function of Atlas.ti to note my interpretations of emotional tone. Both the co-investigator’s speech and my speech were included in transcripts. When they overlapped, the speech of the person who comes in second was bracketed ( ). Typically this was used for my verbal attending markers, e.g. (mhmm). The purpose of these notations were twofold. First, the process drew my attention to places in the text where tacit knowledge may be at play. I used these to guide the questions and comments that I brought back to the co-investigator. The second purpose of these symbols was to make as transparent as possible my interpretive process in the transcription Mishler, 1986).
I then organized the text into stanzas and episodes as the initial steps towards identifying the narratives within the text. To organize the text into stanzas, I followed Gee’s listening method as described by Reissman (1993). Last, I identified episodes that comprised the narrative. Reissman’s descriptions of entrance and exit talk guided how I demarcated the episodes. Organizing and displaying the text in stanzas and episodes helped me to understand how the plot and story lines of each participant’s story unfolded and allowed the form of their narrative to emerge from the interview. I have provided an example taken from Gwen’s interview (Appendix E).

Because Suzanne and I would not be meeting for an interpretation session and because of time constraints for her story I chose to move directly to writing the narrative based on listening to the audio-tape repeatedly and working from a transcript prepared by a professional transcriber. I organized the text provided by the transcriber into stanzas and episodes.

**Collaborative readings**

The transcript provided the basis for the co-investigator and to conduct interpretive readings and then engage in a discussion of these readings. For this process I conducted three interpretive readings: reading for self or the narrator, reading for the research question, a critical reading. I asked participants to consider the time that they had to give the project and choose how many of the readings they would do. Negotiating the time commitment and level of involvement addressed ethical concerns about making excessive time demands on participants and enhanced the collaborative relationship. Leslie and Gwen chose to do the reading for the research question and the critical reading. Cora chose to do the reading for the research question. Suzanne, as discussed
previously, elected not to do the joint interpretation. I provided the co-investigator with a copy of the interview text prepared on large paper with three columns on the side of the text and instructions for reading the text with different interpretive lenses (Appendix F). The first column provides a space for the co-investigator to clarify or correct the content of the transcript. Separate columns were available for each interpretive reading. When I brought the interview text to participants I reminded them to only put as much time as they wanted into the process and also cautioned that spoken language and written language are different, sometimes making reading our own words a disconcerting experience.

*Reading for self of the narrator*. With the first reading, I analyzed the text for ways that the narrator constructs her self through her story. I have used guiding questions (questions 1-11) from Arvay (2001) for this reading and added the last four questions on relational and contextual issues to reflect my interest in analyzing how these shape the construction of the self.

1. Who is telling this story?
2. How is she situated in this story?
3. How does she present herself?
4. What voice does she use?
5. What is she feeling?
6. What parts of herself does she share? Possibly keep hidden?
7. What relationships does she draw on?
8. What does she want to convey to the listener?
9. What does she want to convey to others in the story?
10. How does she create a sense of continuity/consistency of self?
11. How does she understand discontinuity or changes?
12. What relational map does she draw on to tell her experience?
13. How does she speak of time and space?
14. What elements of her contexts does she recognize as significant? How?
15. What cultural resources or meta-narratives does she draw on to tell her story?
Reading for the research question. The second interpretive lens that I applied to the interview transcript was an analysis for the research question (Arvay, 2003). I organized the questions into three sections: (a) how she constructs her sexuality in her home country, (b) how she engages in the immigration process, and (c) how she constructs her sexuality in Canada. I developed these questions as a guide based on the literature I have reviewed and my own experience of the process.

1. Living a lesbian/queer woman/woman attracted to women in home country:
   - How does she come to understand her feelings for/attraction to girls or women?
   - What meanings does she make of these feelings?
   - How does she enact her attraction?
   - What cultural resources or discourses does she draw on?
   - How does she understand her relationships with girls or women?
   - How are relationships drawn on?

2. Engaging in the same-sex couple immigration process:
   - How does she decide to come to Canada?
   - How does she learn about the same-sex partner process?
   - How does she decide to apply through same-sex partner process?
   - How does she experience the application process?
   - What feelings does she have about the process?
   - What meanings does she make of the process?

3. Living as a lesbian/queer/woman attracted to women in Canada:
   - How does she create a life for herself in Canada? (Communities, work, home, family, fun.)
   - How does she interpret and construct her sexuality here?
   - How does she interpret and construct her ethnicity here?
   - How does she interpret and construct her position as immigrant woman here?
   - What new cultural resources or discourses does she draw on?
Critical reading. In the third reading I applied a critical lens to the interview text. Here women’s interpretations of the relations of power and oppression and their strategies for dealing with power and oppression are the focus. The guiding questions, again taken from Arvay (2001) are:

1. How does she speak of power, authority or oppression (racism, heterosexism, sexism)? What meanings does she give to power and authority in her lives?
2. How does she speak of social institutions (e.g. immigration policies)?
3. How did she come to learn of these social institutions?
4. How does she understand their impact of these institutions on her life?
5. How does she understand her interactions with these institutions?

Reflexive reading. I also engaged in a parallel interpretive process for my own interactions in the interview. Using each of the interpretive lenses, I made notes on the contribution I made as a researcher to the interview text and my role in the interactions. I prepared myself for this self-reflexive reading by taking steps to engage and enhance my own awareness throughout the research process. I participated in a seminar on anti-racist pedagogy in an effort to challenge my understandings of race and ethnicity and explore my positioning as a White, feminist, woman doing research on the experiences of women of colour. In addition, as part of a seminar on qualitative research I answered my own research question, constructing my own narrative of living as a lesbian in different cultural contexts and of the immigration process, and I engaged in a journaling and memoing process throughout the inquiry.

The interpretive interview

After the co-investigator and I completed our interpretive readings individually, we met to discuss our interpretive readings. I opened the conversation with a discussion of each of our reactions to the process of reading the interview text. This set the stage for
a reflective dialogue on our interpretations. During this interview, which is also audiotaped, the co-investigator and I sought to understand and explore ambiguous parts of the account, and together consider the personal and cultural implications of our interpretations. I emphasized with participants that we were not trying to reach consensus on one particular meaning or interpretation, and that places where we had different interpretations were of interest me. After the interpretive sessions I listened to the audiotapes of the interpretive sessions, making detailed notes.

*Using software to support analysis*

Prior to beginning this project I was familiar with the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti and chose to use it to support my analysis process. Although computer support is not crucial to the application of this method, I found it useful. I used the *quotation comment* function to record emotional tone of the participants and other non-verbal interactions. Interpretations of individual episodes were recorded using the *code* and *code family* functions. Broader interpretations and interpretations that extended across participants were recorded as memos. I also used the *memo* function to keep process notes and integrate notes from the interpretation sessions. I used the *network builder* function to build concept maps.

*Writing the narratives*

When writing the narratives, I aimed to create engaging texts for readers that provide insight into the women’s discursive production of sexual self. It is my intent to evoke an emotional and intellectual reaction that enhances empathic understanding of issues and works against disembodied or objectifying ways of knowing. With this aim in mind, I have chosen to write the narratives in the first person in order to create a sense of
each woman's voice telling the story. I was cautious initially about using first person, not wanting to usurp or appropriate another’s voice, nor wanting to disguise my interpretive voice. The narrative voice is a co-construction. It is my understanding and interpretation of each woman’s telling of her story and my understanding of the joint interpretation process we engaged in. I chose the first person when I recognized, as a reader and audience of narratives, ways that first person narratives invited me into the subjectivity of the protagonist. In contrast, third person narratives can distance the reader from the protagonist. I experienced this shift from distance to deeper identification when I shifted from writing the narratives in the third person to the first person. The texts are not representations of the interaction, but are written to engage an embodied, interactive reading. It is impossible to recreate the embodied emotionality of the interview, but I have worked to create texts that value the emotions of the narrator (Arvay, 2003).

In a short introduction, I situate each narrative, providing some background information. In these introductions I describe and reflect on aspects of the interview process and my role in the interaction that may have shaped the interaction. In an effort to reflect the narrating process in the written text I used a variety of narrative conventions that I describe in the introduction to each narrative. To construct each woman’s story, I created an outline of the plot from the episodes told in the interview. I wrote emotional reactions into the narrative by referring to emotions directly or through including non-verbal communication that had been enacted in the interview. The results of the interpretive readings were written into the narratives through a range of narrative devices. I have used internal dialogue and reflexive voice for interpretations arrived at jointly in the interpretation session. I have used dialogue format or script writing form for places in
the interview where women vividly enacted conversations. Dialogues were constructed if
women were recollecting conversations from their past. I used script-writing conventions
for hypothetical conversations. At the end of the narrative I include my own
interpretations of the self-narrative and comment on places where multiple interpretations
were discussed.

Returning the narratives

I returned the completed narratives to each of the participants and met with her to
discuss her reactions. Because of her limited time, Suzanne chose to discuss her narrative
in a phone call. These discussions provided an opportunity for further clarification of
content and interpretation. I also initiated a discussion around whether the narrative, in
the form I presented, was written in a manner that protected the participant/co-
investigator’s confidentiality. Where possible, I encouraged participants to show the
narrative to their partners. I emphasized that I was willing to remove or change any
details that might contribute to identifying either the participant or her partner.

Revisiting consent: A participant withdraws

Given the relatively small community that these women, and I, belong to, and the
detailed personal narratives that are the product of this research, maintaining
confidentiality has been a concern and challenge throughout the investigation. As part of
protecting participants’ confidentiality, I approached the informed consent as a
negotiation process, providing a document at the beginning of the interview, and then
revisiting decisions about the content of the narratives at each meeting. I therefore had to
respect the wishes of Cora, when she chose to withdraw her story from the study. I had
interviewed her in the summer of 2003, met for an interpretation session in September,
and returned her narrative to her in December. In February, 2004 she contacted me, asking that her story be removed from the study. She and her partner had become concerned about the impact of having their story published. At the time they were in the midst of a family crisis and did not have time to meet to further discuss the reasons for withdrawing their story or alternatives. Although I have removed her story, and specific references to the content of her narrative from the discussion chapter, my work with her narrative has shaped my interpretation of other narratives, and of my discussion across narratives.
The women that I spoke with are living lives that bend the rules. In their stories they tell how they did it, and what it has meant to them. They have constructed lives that depart from and resist prevailing normative life-scripts and for women. In acting on their attraction to women, forming intimate relationships and lives centred on women, these women have lived in defiance of erasure by heterosexism in their own cultures and in Canada. By accessing the hidden same-sex immigration process, they have engaged with an institution that holds decision-making power over their future, encountering and challenging oppressions of heterosexism, racism, classism and neo-colonialism. Their relocation to a new country, leaving a familiar culture, their families, and communities, also stretches the bounds of common life-paths for women. Relocation creates a major interruption in the life-course as women encounter new possible discourses and navigate their lives from shifting subject positions. The chaos of this disruption necessitates a reconstitution of self and enhances the creative potential for questioning, resistance to dominant discourses, and creation of new constructions of self and context.

Three women shared their stories of immigrating to Canada using an H&C appeal based on a same-sex relationship. I opened my inquiry broadly with the question: How do women who have immigrated through the same-sex partner process narrate their experience? Interpreting the act of narrating as a process whereby people construct self allowed me to extend this question to: How do these women construct self? I was interested in particular in how women construct their sexual self while recognizing that
the sexual self is constitutive of and by other selves. Within the women's self
construction process I have attended in particular to relationships, changing social
context, and their engagement with oppression by asking two further questions: How do
women interpret relationships and their social context in their construction of sexual self?
and How do women interpret their engagement with oppression and power?

The narratives can be read on several levels. In their content, these narratives
offer insight into the events, relationships, and elements of social context that women
remember as significant to their process of understanding their QLGB sexualities and
their immigration process. The women are of different ages, countries of origin,
rural/urban backgrounds, and social classes. One was from an Asian industrializing
country with a history of being colonized and a legal prohibition against homosexuality.
Two are from industrialized European countries. Differences in financial resources and in
legal access to Canada clearly impacted the options available to the women. Juxtaposing
the stories of women from very different home countries and social locations allows
insight into the ways that women's social location may shape the experience and meaning
of the immigration process and settling in Canada. Also, the immigration process itself
changed over the decade that it was used, becoming more available, regularized, and
bureaucratic. I have sequenced the narratives chronologically according to when women
began their immigration process and draw attention to differences in the process for each
of the women. Readers can gain insight into how these different social and historical
locations shaped the experiences and interpretations of each woman. Recognizing that
remembering is a social act (Harre & Stearns, 1995) and cognizant that these narratives
should not be read as literal representations of the past, I invite the readers to enter into
the social worlds of the women, working to notice and make connections between social location, experience, and subjectivity. I invite you, as a reader, to notice places where judgments and defensiveness arise as well as where connection and resonance occur. Use your emotional response to the text as an entry point for self-reflexive questioning.

The content of the stories provides essential context. However, the focus and site of my investigation is the dialogical narrative process. Understanding the construction of the narrative in the research interview as one instance of construction of self, I have written the text of these narratives to display this process. Although the women’s narratives vary widely in the time-span and content covered, three common processes are interwoven into their narratives as storylines: first, their account of the development of the relationship that motivated the migration. Second, their account of the application process. Third, their account of cultural relocation and settlement in Canada. The women discursively construct a sexual self that draws on and incorporates these interpretations when they construct their narrative.

In this chapter, I introduce each narrative with a brief sketch of the participant including her region or country of origin, the time span she narrated, and the context of her immigration process. Recognizing that the research interview is a discursively produced social interaction, I describe aspects of interview context and process. Last, I orient the reader to the narrative itself; describing narrative conventions I used, and foreshadowing some aspects of the story.

In an effort to portray their polyphonic narrative process, I have used different fonts, text arrangements, internal dialogue, and shifts in pronouns to weave different voices into the women’s narratives. The places where women told their stories through
remembered or composite conversations are written as dialogue using the language of the participants. In places where one of the women constructed hypothetical scenes I used script writing conventions to draw attention to her use of the imaginary. Drawing on Bakhtin’s concept of double voicing (Bell & Gardiner, 1998; Whortham, 1999), I interpreted these uses of quoted speech and hypothetical dialogue as places where intensified conflict exist as women develop their own voices through contact with other voices. I draw your attention to shifts in pronoun use, verb tense, active and passive voice, and metaphorical language used by the women as cues to their process. I have paid attention to the language of emotion and self (Harre & Gillett, 1994; Gergan, 1991) that women used in the interviews and interpretation sessions and written them into the text. At the end of each narrative, I provide additional interpretation of the narrative text. I have incorporated interpretations from my self-reflexive reading of the interview texts to comment on the collaborative interpretation and my interpretive process contributed to these interpretations.

All stories are partial and problematic. (Kumashiro, 1995) These narratives can be read as texts that have been shaped by and will, in turn, contribute to the tradition of telling stories of our sexuality (Plummer, 1995). My ability to formulate this research question and gain sufficient support to pursue the topic is a result of the Western tradition of sexual story telling and its acceptance as a legitimate site of research.

The coming out story is the story of sexuality popularized by Western, and increasingly transnational QLGBT organizations, media, and networks of community. Coming out stories have, along with gay and lesbian rights movement, Western social sciences and media, constituted QLGBT sexualities as sources of identity and basis for community
Coming (out) to Canada 62

(Weston, 1998). I draw on the coming out discourse in my title but intentionally worked, with mixed success, to avoid the language of coming out in interviews. All of the women’s stories contain discursive features typical of the coming out story genre. They also contain features that do not support, or work against the discourse of coming out. I call attention to this tension. I invite the reader to read with a critical eye and reflect on ways that these narratives both challenge and reinforce dominant discourses around women’s QLGB sexualities.

Coming into rather than coming out has been proposed as an alternative metaphor for stories of sexuality based on same-sex attraction in some cultures (Chan, 1997). Coming into is a metaphor for having a sense of belonging to a group, such as a family, a community, or friendship, reaffirmed through recognition of one’s intimate partner as a member of this group just as a heterosexual relationship would be. Instead of open disclosure and expression of an identity, coming into foregrounds social recognition of a relationship. The metaphor allows for non-verbal and indirect forms of expression—cooking a favourite food, including someone in a family portrait, or passing on a hello. This metaphor fits with my own experience of coming into my partner’s family and with my interactions as a partnered lesbian with different groups of people in Thailand. When I explore the implications of this metaphor I see that the conflict is not self vs. social expectations, but that a tension exists between indirectness vs. directness that tests everyone’s tolerance for ambiguity. If there is a conflict it is a largely unspoken one of family or group vs. wider social expectations. I foreground this metaphor as one I was sensitized to listen for in the stories women told me.
Our Public Secrets

We dwell in paradox

Swimming in a sea of words

words form
and (de)forming
around us
as we speak
and listen

The nuances of consciousness,
   emotions both subtle and profound,
inner yearnings,
the whispering of conscience
All of these are created
in the matrix of this language

When we tell one another our deepest secrets

We use a public language*

We build them
I rebuild them
You rebuild as you read
Conduits and crafters

Text lines 1-15 are paraphrased, re-ordered, and arranged from “Life Stories Pieces of a Dream” by Mary Gergan (1997, p 204)

Gwen

Narrative Context and Process

Gwen grew up in a Central European city of 2 million people. She started her story in 1988, her high school graduation year, and then described the year she spent travelling in Canada. It was during this year that she met and fell in love with a Canadian woman. They maintained a long distance relationship for 5 years, each woman coming to spend extended visits in the other’s country through apprenticeships and working holiday visas. They were among the first couples to use an appeal on H & C grounds based on a same-sex relationship in the mid-nineties.

Prior to the interview, I knew that shortly after Gwen arrived in Canada her partner ended the relationship. I knew that Gwen had chosen to remain in Canada despite the break up and had for many years struggled with feeling like an immigration fraud. Although Gwen has told parts of her story to others, our interview was the first time she had told the story from start to finish. Knowing the retelling would be an emotional experience for her, Gwen had given the act of telling her story a great deal of thought and preparation. She had taken boxes of documents and photos out of storage and referred to these during the interview. She began her story with a summary of her understanding of my interest in the topic, and a remarkably clear abstract of her story including her motivation for telling the story. I have included the summary and abstract in stanza format directly from the interview transcript.

Gwen tells her story as a cautionary tale for others, warning partners not to enter into the immigration process lightly. To reflect this I begin her story with the break up, using her metaphor of a shipwreck as a title, and then return to 1988 when she begins her
travels. I have structured her story into parts using phrases from the interview as titles: Shipwrecked, On the road, Trying on Canada, Applying: Taking it on, Adrift, Finding my footing, Full Circle. Gwen’s narrative provides a critical counterpoint to the other stories centred around couples. Hers is a story of reconstructing her life out of a devastating and disorienting loss. In her narrative, she strives to make meaning of the break up, the immigration process, and her decision to remain in Canada.

Gwen’s Story

So what I hear you say is the interesting part for you is the identification as a lesbian in two cultures then the journey of immigration of pursuing a wish come true and how to jump the hoops and the tapes which is usually from a society that doesn't support lesbians how that is actually succeeded

Well... you'll find a lot of that in my story

Well I would like to first of all start with saying why I'm interested in sharing this story because I think that that is important

Gwen eased back into her chair

The whole process goes basically from 1988 to present It involves my development of identity, self, lesbian evolving to having a relationship with someone at all and pursuing it in coming over here in establishing a complete new life finding my footing after being thrown off and now being where I am now so I'm actually at a full circle that I'm now at a stable situation that I can talk
1993, Shipwrecked

Within moments of seeing her at the airport I could feel that something had changed. All her usual signs of her affection and love were different, somehow hallow. The care she had taken in the past to welcome my arrival was missing. We went through the motions for three days before I asked her what was wrong. Her answer sent me reeling into what I call my shipwreck time. She was stepping out of our commitment and I was left alone, adrift, and in peril in a foreign country. I had no support, was unsure of my legal status, and was completely thunderstruck by how our relationship could have unraveled so completely in such a short time.

The lesbian grapevine kicked in and I was offered a place housesitting while I collected enough of my bearings to plan my next step. Had I gone back within a week I could have stepped back into my old life: same apartment, back to school, friends waiting. I chose to stay. I needed to understand what had happened; the people who could help me do that were here in Canada. Back home, friends had believed in us, putting their hopes into our love transcending geographic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries; willing us to succeed as a lesbian couple taking on discrimination in order to be together. We had been living a dream that so many have. I could not face these friends unless I knew that I had done everything possible to make the relationship work. I chose to stay, giving myself a year. Having worked this hard for the opportunity to be here it seemed ridiculous to let it slip. I would stay and do my best to repair, or at least understand, the end of the relationship.
1988, *On the Road*

I had graduated high school in the late eighties unsure of what I wanted to do next. I was very confused, and in some ways frightened about my future. The subgroup that I belonged to in high school was a group of people that was searching for better ways of being. We wanted to create an alternative to the extreme competition and stifling repression we saw in our society. That was the path I was on, but my sense of where or how to proceed was very unclear. Rather than pursue a university program without any direction, I decided to travel for a year.

Canada was freeing for me: I marveled at the wide open space, the stunning landscapes, the gentle, friendly people, and a greater sense of personal safety than I had ever known. I was amazed when I saw that even panhandlers were polite, not the offensive, aggressive characters I was used to fending off. I discovered that the hard defences I had armed myself with were excessive and unnecessary in Canada. The realization calmed me. I felt reassured when I saw people of different cultures living peacefully with, from what I could see then, minimal racism. Coming from two cultures myself, the cultural diversity brought a sense of ease for me.

Being on the road, feeling so open and outgoing, I met people easily. Beth was someone I exchanged addresses with at a youth hostel. The first time we talked is memorable only because we were later able to reconstruct the misunderstanding that occurred. Solitude was rare in youth hostels, and I was in the common bathroom appreciating having it to myself, when I heard a woman’s voice asking if I would mind passing her towel. I passed the towel. Beth read my appearance and my apparent comfort with her chatting naked with me in the common bathroom, as meaning I was a
lesbian. I was not then. I am European, unphased by skin, but to her my spiky hair and steady, unflinching eye contact meant something quite different.

Many months and cities later, approaching the end of my travels and still uncertain of my next step, sickness forced me to stop moving. I recuperated in the youth hostel for several weeks. It was on one of my rare trips out for food and money that I heard someone call my name. I dismissed the impossibility of it in a city where I had barely spoken to anyone. Then heard it again. Turning, I saw a green figure walking towards me--Beth, smiling. She had only recently moved to the city.

We agreed to meet at a nearby café once I had completed my errands. Over coffee, tentativeness gave way to a closely-knit conversation. I felt myself warm to her. Trust, something I usually gave warily, seemed to come naturally with her. I was enjoying being able to talk to a woman freely and just be me. She felt like a childhood best friend, but also new. I became aware of the affection that was happening, of the teasing going on between us. I noticed I was behaving as if I was flirting with her.

My travels had been a time of exploration on so many levels. I left my home country uncertain of my future, knowing only that I wanted the experience of being able to travel independently as a woman, be in a new place, entirely self-sufficient, able to protect myself, make my own choices, and forge my own path. I had left my home country aware that something did not feel right; something was not working. I did not feel like I fit. I felt lost. My sense of my future was unclear. I had a kind of boyfriend who was very sweet, but there was no electricity. I could not picture myself as a wife raising children in the traditional way. While traveling I had a sense that I was exploring
possibilities for myself. Sitting in the café with Beth, feeling warm, understood, and engaged, I felt myself grow clearer.

As the threads of our conversation wove more closely, Beth confessed that she was attracted to me, admitting that she half expected me to leave. I assured her that I was not shocked and admitted some uncertainty about my own sexuality. Inwardly, I was flattered and very drawn to her. My sense of what a lesbian could be began shifting slightly. Back home, lesbian, to me, had meant asexual and depressed women in purple pants. This version of lesbian did not mesh with my sense of myself as a sexual being.

Beth and I spent much of the next two weeks together. We went on long walks and hikes, challenging each other physically—who can run faster, jump higher. After running in a park one day, we dropped off the path and collapsed, out of breath, under a tree. I am not sure how it happened. I remember propping ourselves against the tree trunk, leaning closer to her, and then we were kissing.

I retreated the next day. Scared and confused, I left the city to spend a week on the farm of some people I had met travelling. I enjoyed the change of scenery and the space, but silenced myself about the confusion I was feeling. I knew being with a women was not something you talked about with people you had just met.

At the same time I could feel my sense of identity coming into place; my elements of masculine and feminine coming home. The group of friends I was part of in high school had been into exploring and pushing the boundaries of convention, and that had included gender. I had always had a sense of myself as someone who encompassed male and female attributes. I could swing a hammer and use a sewing machine with equal comfort. I enjoyed being physically active and independent, and could also be quiet and
caring. However, for my own safety in my city, I had taken on more masculine attributes in my appearance and body language and de-emphasized my feminine. My relationships with girlfriends had always been intense, very intimate, and quite physical. I had a warm relationship with my boyfriend, but felt closest to my girlfriend, seeing myself in some ways as her protector. All of these things began sifting into place.

When I was young I enjoyed using my strength, cycling, jumping over ditches, getting messy, getting grubby, fixing things, climbing on trees. At the same time I would also enjoy making cookies, making a good meal, knitting, sewing or even playing Barbie dolls. But the games my Barbie dolls would play were always a bit different. They were always around amazons and independent female creatures. They were out kicking butt if people were not treating others equally. They were always on the side of the suppressed.

Returning to the city, I remember holding a quarter in my hand. I had two phone numbers in my pocket and I knew I was making a choice more significant than where to spend the night. One number was for a couch with a friend where I had perhaps already overstretched my welcome, the other was Beth’s. I held the coin and checked in with myself. Then put it to fate. The line at my friend’s was busy, but Beth picked up right away. Excited, she gave me clear directions from the terminal to her home.

I knew I was saying yes to her. I knew my life was going to change 180 degrees. When I had this coin in my hand, I felt that it was going to change my whole life professionally, socially, and the way I see myself as a woman. I accepted this and felt a sense of coming together. I felt that it would be accepting my blend of male and my female sides that I have always felt I have. It was important to me to be able to be a full human, to have both, and I still have that in me.
Looking back I see that, without acknowledging what I was doing, I had created room for the changes to occur. Before leaving for Canada I had told my boyfriend I was unsure about our commitment. While I was travelling, I had called him and told him I did not want him to come to meet me in Canada.

I was walking up the street when Beth came bouncing up the hill to meet me. We were both beaming as we walked to her place. We talked about her living arrangement on the way home, of her two new housemates only one knew for certain that she was a dyke. We got settled into her house and had dinner. That night when we made love together, it was a revelation; my body, spirit, and mind coming together sexually. For the first time all of the zones of touch and no touch on my body dissolved away and I was whole. It was amazing and I was deeply moved.

We spent two intense weeks together, and then I had to move on to the apprenticeship I had arranged in another province. During those months she was like my sweet secret. We wrote letters back and forth and I thought about her constantly. The only person who I told about her was another European man I had met traveling. We shared a car to drive across the country and into the South Western United States, and after days of my inconceivable obliviousness to his charms he asked

“You’re from the other side, aren’t you?” comprehension emerging in his voice.

“Yes, I am.” and it was the first time that I felt that, yes, since Beth and I had made love, I knew I was from the other side. In different ways I had always felt from the other side. I had always thought of myself as someone who had a perspective that knew both sides: from my mother and my father I held two cultures; I had always thought of
myself as holding both the masculine and the feminine. And now, sexually as well, I knew both sides. In this way, the change in my sexuality felt consistent.

Driving along the highway, I remember having an urge to call Beth in the middle of the day. I fought the urge for two exits and then asked if we could pull over at the next rest stop. Beth’s roommate answered. She told me Beth had been in an accident the day before, and was hospitalized for surgery. I knew I needed to see her.

Beth greeted us stiffly and was sharp with both of us, when my travel companion dropped me off at her house. He took me aside briefly,

“Are you sure you want to stay here, because she is treating you really badly.”

I suspect she may have been jealous seeing me with a man, and she certainly was anxious. Her mother was coming to stay to look after her during her recovery. Beth’s mother liked me when I was Beth’s friend. I was helpful around the house and defended her against the immense spiders that lurked the basement apartment. When sleeping arrangements were discussed, however, her affection chilled. Beth held firm. We slept in the same bed, but her mother was brittle with me for the rest of her visit. I spent several weeks with Beth, caring for her during her recovery. I was her strong and tender Amazon protector, carrying her, helping her take her first steps again, seeing to all her needs.

My journeying year had come to an end; my visa was running out and I had decided that after my year of playing and exploring, it was time for me to return to real life and start laying the foundations for my career. I had looked into university in Canada, but was not able to get my credentials recognized. I was accepted at a university back home. Beth and I parted not knowing if or when we would see each other again.
We both knew that the relationship probably would not last, so we set each other free to see others, but promised to stay in contact.

*Returning*

Returning was difficult. I did not want to be back, and no longer identified with the culture. I had seen different ways of being, seen gentleness, and experienced living with safety. I was homesick for Canada. I returned home knowing that I needed to put into place the understanding I had come to in Canada. I also knew being a lesbian was not safe, so I had to be careful. It took me about half a year of investigating to make contact with lesbians. With Beth's encouragement I sought out contacts with lesbians in my university through feminist organizations and women's martial arts clubs. I worked up the nerve to attend a coming out group for women. There were six of us and it was a big deal to walk past the crowd of stares, jeers and threats, through the door, into that room. I started dating a woman from my martial arts club. My circle grew.

In my city lesbians were undercover, existing in networks of bubbles that would only know about each other in closeted situations. In a particular club you would know that 80% of the women there were lesbians, but nobody would openly talk about it except at private parties. It felt like a layered kind of existence.

Beth came for a two-week visit the following summer. The visit started awkwardly. I had told her which one of the three train stations to get off at, but from her Canadian perspective a city has only one station. She ignored my instructions. By the time I found her I had searched all three train stations. I was both relieved and furious and let her know it. Perhaps I was too harsh. That is another cultural difference. In my
country, we can be angry, get it out, and then be fine a few minutes later. Not so for Beth I learned.

Despite the awkward start, Beth and I quickly rediscovered our feelings for each other. I remember butterflies in my stomach and my hands shaking as I drove. We just clicked together. She reminded me of Canada: the friendliness, the playfulness, the joy and the creativity, the nature and the quiet. By the end of her visit, we were talking about how we could be together again.

We continued our letters back and forth. That flow of letters never stopped. At least twice a month, we sent handwritten letters in which we sorted out our feelings for each other, processed all the events of our life, and planned how to have more time together. With her help, I applied for and received an apprenticeship. It would be an opportunity to see how living in Canada would be for me.

*Trying on Canada*

During my apprenticeship we had, for the first time, a normal, daily routine. We settled easily into a rhythm of waking, eating, working, and fun. We fought, too. There were arguments, as in any relationship, but there was making up. By the end of my apprenticeship we knew we wanted to commit to finding a way to be together. We had no sense though of whether that would be possible.

The tension of not knowing and the forced intensity of our limited and precious time together took its toll on us. We both struggled with how to feel any sense of security in a relationship that was so vulnerable. We were different in our need for security too. I was used to being strong on my own, lowering my defenses to be open
with her was my struggle. She needed intense togetherness and felt threatened by aloneness. It was a meeting of opposites, but that is true in most relationships I suspect.

A few weeks before I left Canada, in a very classic way, I proposed to her. I gave her a ring and asked her to hold a place in her heart for me. We had a ceremony with friends to witness: this is our truth and we are going to go for it. Our promise was that she would come to spend time with me in my country. Having seen my parents work through their cultural differences in their marriage, I knew it was crucial that she experience my culture to understand me. Our commitment included an understanding that we would work to be together long term, but allow each other freedom for other sexual relationships while we were apart. We knew we were not nuns. We agreed that if another person came into our lives we would tell the other person about it, but we would have each other as our primary relationship. We were finding our own arrangement; there was no label or word for how to do it.

I later learned that she and I understood this commitment to an open relationship in very different ways. I have found Canadians do not stick to their word; they will change their minds and not tell you. Perhaps because of having more space and freedom to maneuver, the commitment to communication with others, particularly if there is a conflict, is not as strong. You simply do not rely on each other as strongly here, so you do not have to arrange yourself with other people as much. Communication with self is very committed; perhaps the more solitary way of life here fosters this. Where I come from, there is no space to back off. Commitment to working through a confrontation is intense. You have to take your space and clearly tell others this is my space.
I returned home to school and work, and began preparations for her to come stay with me. It was important to me that she know my culture well. She was drawn to my culture initially, however, finding work and friends she could connect with was very difficult. I knew that finding work would be a challenge for her. The time frame for looking for work in Europe and Canada is so different. In Canada, you apply for a job and start the next week. In Europe, if you want work in June you start applying in January. I explained this to her, but some lessons you have to experience for yourself. Without real work, she became isolated and dependent. She had no independent sense of purpose or competence. I had connected her with friends that spoke some English, but she complained that their English was not good enough for real conversation.

We had the support, although not complete acceptance, of my parents. When I had come out to them, they had assured me of their love, but admitted that they could not completely accept my being a lesbian. They are pragmatic people though, and it is better to have your daughter safe than not safe, so when I told them that Beth and I were being harassed by the man in the room below us in our shared housing, they helped me with a down payment for an apartment. Having our own space was perhaps a blessing and a curse. We were secure, but it further isolated Beth. We were safe, but the payments were more than I could really afford.

Our year in my home country was difficult. She was utterly dependent on my help, and struggling to maintain any sense of competence. Working two jobs to support us left me with very little energy at the end of the day. I was exhausting myself trying to meet her needs. It was awful seeing her suffer and feeling utterly powerless to help her. She hated the pollution, the noise, and the aggression of my city. Although I hated these
things too, it hurt me that she could not see past them to some of the values of my culture. I found myself defending my culture to her. It was my home after all.

We both missed the openness of the lesbian community we had enjoyed in Canada. In Canada, we had been in a city full of open dyke events, lesbian and women only events. We lived in a neighborhood where we could see other dyke couples, where it was safe to hold hands. I had been amazed at how open and accepting the city was, not realizing at the time that our neighborhood was special. But back in Europe, we had only a very underground sense of community. In some ways it was a much tighter community, since resistance fuels fierce commitment to maintaining and supporting other lesbians, but it was a clandestine existence.

Our relationship survived the challenge of this difficult year. There were good times among all the tension. Quiet nights at home were always sweet. Our sex was always good. The kinesthetic always brought us home.

We also enjoyed enormous support from friends. Other lesbians were amazed by the fact that we had fallen in love with each other over the distance, and that we were making it work. Just having lesbians fall in love and being together was a form of resistance worthy of support. Friends would want to support us to pursue their own happiness and their own dreams. It was about fulfilling dreams. We were living a dream a lot of people had.

I wonder if because of being lesbians, being in resistance, because we have to resist in order to have the space to exist, because there was no easy way, because we were different, maybe the fight was more what stuck us together than the relationship in the end. The process of immigration took over from building the relationship. I think that
really is what happened. The relationship was very much there at the beginning and was very strong, but there was not enough soil to grow. The soil got thinner and thinner with the stresses we had to deal with. In the process, we both did things to each other that were very harmful for our hearts.

Applying: Taking it on

We found new hope for our relationship in a newspaper article. Beth sent me a clipping about a lawyer, Rob Hughes, who was using an appeal on Humanitarian and Compassionate grounds to apply for permanent residence for his Thai lover. My attempts to apply to return to Canada as a student had not worked, and I now believe that the applications failed because it was a closeted approach. Here was an opportunity to be open. We decided together: let's see how it is being done, let's be out, tell them who we are, and what we want. That is how we joined LEGIT, which at the time consisted of ten couples who were finding their way through the maze of Canadian Immigration.

The opportunity to challenge an unjust system appealed to my sense of resistance. We have a word that means a combination of resistance and will to live in the face of difficulty. I relate it to the resistance movement during World War Two. The harsher the oppression, the more radical the resistance became. The bleaker your surroundings, the stronger your will to survive and even flourish becomes. I was used to seeing and grasping small opportunities for resistance. Because of that I was able to see hope. Making the impossible, possible was worth striving for.

Together we built our application documenting our transatlantic relationship. The documentation filled a four-inch binder: plane tickets, phone bills, pictures, letters of
support, documents, and official translations of documents. We knew we had to build a strong case.

Program Manager
Canadian Consulate General
Seattle, WA

Dear Mr. Cameron,

I am writing to express my wish and intention to be able to live with my partner Beth Jones. We have been in a same-sex relationship for six years. I am applying for permanent residency status on the basis of humanitarian and compassionate grounds because I have not provided a qualified independent application. However, if certain criteria have changed and I now qualify as an independent, I would not object to having my application processed in this manner.

This clause asked the officer to use their discretion to process me as an independent. If they did, only the officer and I would know that I was granted status based on my relationship. In some ways it was a closeted approach, very backdoor. It was not saying we are proud that we are a same-sex couple, but this was as proud as we could get in those days.

I worked up the nerve to ask my parents to write a letter of support for the relationship. Given that we come from a society where you do not publicly declare that your children are gay, that the genocide of lesbians and gay men was in their living memory, writing an official letter was a major step for them. They wrote a heartfelt letter stating that they had seen Beth and I as a loving couple, that they consented to the relationship, and that they supported my decision to emigrate. I was deeply moved by their letter and the love it showed.
The validation I experienced through asking people for letters was amazing. My request inspired conversations about my relationship, my future, and about how people knew me, that I would not have had otherwise. People wrote letters with great care and thought. Most were hand written and several pages long. I received letters from my family, friends—straight and gay—even my ex-boyfriend. The letters created tangible reminders of the supportive people in my life, just as I was mentally preparing to leave. I struggled to make peace with my decision and what it meant: letting go of my country, going away from people I loved, giving up my job, giving up my apartment, and going into an uncertain place.

On the other side, I also saw coming to Canada as a light at the end of tunnel. I felt my life in Canada would be easier as a woman and as a lesbian. I could leave behind the implicit threats and overt oppression I had been vigilant against most of my life. I have always been appalled at the systemic scrutiny and persecution of those who are different that my country has been capable of. My fear of this threat wove its way into my movements, my dress, and my way of being. I had a sense that I could leave some of that behind.

We felt some pressure to prepare our application as quickly as possible. Only one or two couples had successfully used the process at that point and we were not certain how long this window of opportunity would last. We were sending materials back and forth constantly and having long conversations on the phone. We shared with each other the anxieties we were carrying about the huge changes we were taking on. We both admitted to worrying that our relationship would not survive. At the same time, we knew we wanted to be together and that this was the only way.
We were so careful in our preparations. I was determined not to let anything stand in our way. The thought that one officer could use his power to control my life infuriated me. “How dare you keep me from my partner! How dare you.”

We submitted our application in February and by March I received a letter stating I had an interview in Seattle. I had to ask a friend of my father’s to write a medical note so that I could take time off of school. He had no issue with writing the excuse, explaining that his father had done the same to assist Jews out of the country during the Nazi’s. He saw his note as helping me live the life I wanted to despite official discrimination. Had we been straight, I would have been able to take time off to get married. “Just be smart about it. Don’t come back with a suntan.”

We had a wonderful reunion in Canada, spending the first two days reveling in the possibility of being together. We were both incredibly nervous when we boarded the bus to go to the interview. The movie Green Card was out at the time and we were expecting to be grilled about toothbrush colours and sides of the bed. To my relief and surprise, we were well received and treated with respect. We sat down to tea and cookies and the officer flipped through our application, asking a few questions about what it was like to live as a lesbian in my home country. He asked relevant, fundamental questions about the future we were planning. He moved on to ask some security related questions. I laughed when he asked about a terrorist group that no longer existed. Then, to my astonishment, the officer said,

“You will hear from us, but I'm giving you this entire binder back. This has nothing to do in our office. I don't want it to be flying around.”

That felt extremely respectful.
We both left the consulate stunned and each went for separate walks to collect our thoughts. The grueling challenge of the application process was done and now there was this void. What next? The reality of the steps we had begun were sinking in for both of us, but we were at very different places. I had already begun the process of thinking about leaving my country and what that would mean. On the other hand, throughout the application process Beth’s life had continued, relatively unchanged. The interview brought forth the realization that her life was going to change profoundly when I arrived. The rest of our week together was filled with questions and conversations about how we would proceed. How would I handle the interruption in my education? Would we live together? We talked about our fears. She had doubts about how she would react to having her freedom restricted. She was still dating other women, I thought occasionally, but agreed to stop. I worried about being too dependent on her, wanting to be certain to establish some friends and interests independent of the relationship.

We also realized that we were having lots of fights and arguments because of the tensions of maintaining a long distance relationship under such uncertainty. Looking back, I think it would have been good if we had had counselling or some other support, but we had nothing. There were no role models or guides. LEGIT did not offer anything of the kind, and we did not have the finances to pay a professional. I believe it is important for people to get that kind of support. The application process is actually just the beginning of the struggle. Far more challenging, are the struggles that come after the application is accepted.
I returned home, inwardly bursting, wanting to share my news, but having to pretend I had just recovered from a bout of stomach flu. We heard from Immigration Canada within a month.

“We got it.” Her voice was completely flat, with no trace of excitement. I was chilled. I checked in with my doubts and fears. Do I really want to leave my country, my family, and my friends? Do I really want to give up my education, my job, and my home? Is this dream really what I want to do? Do I really want to do it at this time when I sense that her commitment is not 100%?

I went dancing one night and I asked myself. What could happen if I take this path? What happens if I do not? I found myself saying, if I do not go, I will not know why it did not work. If it works, I am taking a wonderful opportunity of fulfilling a dream. I also asked myself, do I have the resources to stand on my own in Canada if everything goes down. I am a pessimist. Never expecting things to work out, I go for safety. I prepared everything for a worst-case scenario so that I could return to my country after one year.

The weight of leaving the familiar for the unknown hit me as I watched all of my belongings in crates get taken away on a forklift at the pier. Friends had come along to support me and threw wonderful farewell parties and brunches. Just before leaving I checked with Beth one last time.

“Do you still want me to come? It is not too late to call it off.”

“Yes, I want you to come. I want to live my life with you.”
My friends saw me off at the airport despite the 5 am departure time. Arriving in Canada I remember an incredible sense of liberation as I passed through customs unworried for the first time and officially gained status as a permanent resident.

Within moments of seeing her at the airport I could feel that something had changed. All her usual signs of her affection and love were different, somehow hallow. The care she had taken in the past to welcome my arrival was missing. We went through the motions for three days before I asked her what was wrong.

Adrift

Beth's words left me stunned. I had uprooted my life for this relationship and now she was backing out. Shipwrecked. The loss was disorienting: all of my decisions of the last six years were cast into doubt, my sense of trust shattered, and my sense of my future an abyss. I was alone, adrift, and in peril in a foreign country: without support, and unsure of my legal status. Anger and anxiety passed through me in waves as I cocooned and tried to gather my bearings. It took me five days to be able to respond to my mother's phone calls. She was horrified when I told her. "Just come home." She urged.

Finding my Footing

I spent a week with a friend on an island. The retreat had been intended as a honeymoon for Beth and I, celebrating our success. Long walks and brisk ocean swims brought me back, reminding me of my strength. I met members of the small island community and was given sympathy and invitations to talk. Even when I talked, I was wary of sharing too much. Coming into Canada through this backdoor process meant I was uncertain of my status. If the relationship no longer existed, was I here under false
pretences? I was not certain. Beth had become someone I did not know. Would she try to report me to Immigration?

I had to carry this uncertainty for a long time: No one was able to tell me what my legal status was. I contacted people from LEGIT as well as Rob Hughes and received no definite answer, nor any offer of support. My efforts to reach out to the contacts I had made during previous stays were also fruitless. Of the many phone calls I made, only one woman really responded with support. She was from my home country, also a lesbian, and had immigrated herself, although as an independent. She listened and understood, completely supporting my decision to stay.

I feared that if I returned home I would feel defeated and weak. I did not have the strength to go home and face people who had held such hopes for Beth and I. I feared that I would carry ghosts, whispering doubts about whether I had given the relationship a proper try. I chose to stay to understand the break up, to see if there was any hope of recovering the relationship once Beth came to terms with her fears, and to reassure myself that I had done everything possible to make it work.

I also chose to stay for myself. I took the opportunity to do training that would help my professional work as a physiotherapist. I did the typical immigrant thing of volunteering in order to gain enough Canadian experience to build a resume, and the typical lesbian thing of working in a queer pub and then a group home.

With each practical step towards rebuilding a life, I regained some of my balance, but the balance remained tenuous. Financially, I was always on the brink. I felt steps away from the street. Unable to afford my own place, I was at the mercy of the people I rented cheap rooms from. I was reeling from my own trauma and then buffeted by their
strange dramas and traumas. At the pub where I worked, I was supposed to be this light, flirtatious thing. I felt anything but. The lesbian community being relatively small, inevitably I ran into women who knew parts of my story, or worse, women whom Beth had slept with.

Full Circle

I will always be grateful for the picture of myself that my friend gave me just before I left. It was the talisman that reminded me of me. It showed me being centred, happy, strong, and knowing what I want to do; me before the shipwreck.

I know now that I approached the relationship and immigration process with integrity. I made very conscious choices, very aware of the process, very aware of my risk, very aware that I was walking an edge. I thought we could do it. I believed we had the ability to succeed. I have come to understand some of why the relationship ended, and own my part in it without seeing it as a personal failure.

It has taken me years to regain my footing and feel truly secure again. At the end of the first year I considered returning home, and have reconsidered my decision several times along the way. I know that I have created a life for myself here that would not have been possible in my home country: the sense of safety, openness, and quality of life I enjoy here would not have been possible for me as a lesbian. I have set up an independent practice that I am proud of. Just last year I was able to buy my own home with the help of an inheritance from my Aunt. I have just finished renovating it from the inside out; a great parallel for my own process. I have come home.

Since moving to Canada I have felt myself gradually unpeel. I have felt myself become more comfortable with being gentler, and exploring more feminine aspects of
myself. I have grown my hair long. My long hair both takes up space and shows that I now feel safer as a woman. Ironically, I find my clients and others are often more accepting of some of my more radical ideas now that I have a slightly softer way of being. For the past few years I have felt at ease with my particular blend of masculine and feminine.

I personally resonate more with dyke than with lesbian. Dyke, besides being like the word for woman in one of the languages I speak, also means the place where water and land meet. Dyke, for me, means someone who is at the meeting place of different sides, someone who understands and encompasses more than one perspective. A dyke is a mediator and that perfectly describes my place in the world on many levels: being raised in two cultures, I was a mediator; encompassing male and female attributes, mediator; coming from Europe, living in Canada, mediator; promoting an Eastern form of healing in a Western country, mediator. Knowing both sides is a hard position to be in, but it is also a place of strength, and I like it here.

Researcher Reflections

Gwen weaves three interconnected achievement challenges into her story: The challenge of creating a relationship, of pursuing immigration as a “wish come true”, and of taking on a discriminatory immigration system. In the abstract of her story, she situates these challenges in the context of a society where lesbians are not supported, foregrounding her struggle with homophobia. In her narrative, she works to construct the immigration process as a success despite the break up of the relationship. She does this, in part, by emphasizing the application as an opportunity for resistance. Regardless of the outcome of the relationship, she has successfully taken on an unjust system. She then
critiques the motivation of pursuing a "wish come true," calling into question whose wish it was; hers or other lesbians eager to support lesbians taking on injustice. She frames her decision to stay in Canada as a way to be certain that she has not failed to save the relationship. She also establishes a reason to stay for her own career development. She comes to understand that her relationship may have suffered as a result of the resistance required to exist as a lesbian and pursue immigration. This understanding creates a resolution that maintains the success of the immigration and reframes the break up as a result of social forces rather than personal failure. Ultimately, she constructs her achievement as her ability to reorient and reconstruct her life in Canada, enjoying a better quality of life as a woman and as a lesbian than might have been possible in her home country.

Gwen used figurative language referring to paths, journeys, exploration and coming home throughout her narrative. She begins her story by embarking on travels she explicitly frames as a journey of self discovery, a popular meta-narrative in Western cultures. Her journey carries her from a period of feeling confused, stifled and depressed, through to a sense of greater freedom, independence, and safety, into new possibilities and greater certainty. Journey and exploration provide Gwen with a flexible frame for her self construction process that accommodates mutability, incoherence, periods of adversity, uncertainty, and events beyond her control.

I noticed ways that Gwen highlighted the role of fate or destiny in her narrative. While telling her story, Gwen emphasized, in content, process, and non-verbal communication, the incredible set of coincidences that allow her and Beth to meet: in a strange city, knowing no one, rarely going out, Beth having just moved. She appeals to
fate again when faced with a decision about whether or not to act on her attraction to Beth. She takes time to “check in” and then puts the decision to chance. I interpreted this appeal to fate is one example of how Gwen works the tension between awareness, acknowledgement, and ownership of sexual self versus disavowal, distancing, and rejection of sexual self in her narrative. In telling her coin-in-the-hand story, Gwen acknowledges the choice she is making, and then distances herself from ownership of the decision. Once fate plays its hand, she acknowledges awareness of the implications of her decision.

This same tension is played out in Gwen’s telling of the café conversation. She describes her interaction with Beth using the passive voice: *I became aware of affection happening, teasing was going on,* and describes her own actions from an on-looker’s perspective using phrasing that suggests performance: *I noticed I was behaving as if I was flirting with her.* When she described the event the first time, she did not mention that Beth had spoken directly of her attraction for Gwen, creating a narrative context that allows the attraction to exist without Gwen having to directly state her feelings. It was after she told the coin-in-the hand story that Gwen revealed the direct conversation in the café.

Drawing on a mixture of romantic, modernist, and postmodern discourses of self, gender and sexualities in her narrative, Gwen creates consistency and coherence of self as she narrates her construction of sexual self from high school through to the present. She constructs her self as someone who has always resisted limiting, mainstream conventions. Seeing opportunities for resistance and being a protector of the weak or oppressed are themes that reemerge through out her self-narrative, becoming incorporated into her
construction of dyke or lesbian sexual self. As a high school student she rejected possible future selves based on dominant narratives of heterosexuality. Later in her narrative process she returns to this time period describing it as a one where she felt confused, lost, and out of place. In this manner, she narrates her process of disassembling a sexual self based on heterosexuality. At the same time, she had rejected a lesbian sexual self based on a construction of lesbian as asexual and depressed. Her travels become a time when she has the freedom, openness, and opportunity to begin a tentative exploration of a lesbian sexual self. She revises her construction of lesbian to be more compatible with her sense of her own sexuality.

Gwen draws on modern discourses of self and gender to make meaning of changes in her gender performance. She describes her gender as having always comprised “masculine” and “feminine” aspects. By describing her process of becoming calmer, gentler, and more able to express “feminine” aspects of herself in Canada as “unpeeling,” she frames Canada as a place that allows her to be or express something that has been part of her all along. She makes sense of her earlier masculinity as necessary for the social context, but as a distortion. Discursively, Canada becomes a place that allows her to balance her “masculine” and “feminine” to become more “fully human.” She also uses language that suggests creativity and agency when she speaks of blending different aspects of genders.

Telling her story as a journey, Gwen frames her struggles and resistance with oppressions as a mission that contributes continuity to her self-narrative. She foregrounds her struggle to exist as a lesbian in her abstract of her story. In early parts of her story she emphasizes ways that the Nazi history of her home culture has intensified
her commitment and ability to see opportunities for resistance. She is energized and galvanized by the opportunity to resist the heterosexism of the immigration process. Her story of successful resistance is a source of strength and achievement for Gwen.

As she tells her story, Gwen elaborates on her personal construction of dyke as mediator. Dyke as mediator has become a metaphor for self which creates cohesion among the dual perspectives held by her multiple selves. The metaphor provides a unity of purpose for her career, cultural, and sexual selves. The strength and value of Gwen's metaphor was apparent in the interview. As I worked with the story, I noticed ways that Gwen enacts this mediator position in her narrative process. Her position as mediator is most clearly created in her construction of her relationship and the break-up as a series of cultural misunderstandings. Gwen describes each interaction from dual perspectives to reveal the source of the misunderstanding. As mediator she is able to see, and in many cases advise Beth, on important cultural differences. In her interactions with me during the joint interpretation process she also enacted her mediator, interpreting cultural differences to clarify her story.
Suzanne

**Narrative Context and Process**

Suzanne started her story in Canada where she was studying English in the early nineties. She had her first relationships with women during this visit. She spent several years moving between Europe and Canada as a researcher and writer. She became a permanent resident using the H&C process in 1997.

Because Suzanne was concerned about the time-consuming nature of the research process, we agreed to a single interview. I therefore did not have discussions from the joint interpretation session to integrate into her narrative. I have retold her story by arranging excerpts from our interview, paraphrasing and editing the excerpts for readability. The interpretation within her story is therefore not as rich as the interpretation in the other women's stories. Further, my researcher reflections at the end of the narrative are not produced through the negotiated and iterative process that the others were.

I have structured Suzanne's story into six parts: In Canada and at home, Returning to Canada, Deciding to immigrate, Applying to immigrate, Settling in(to) Canada: my struggle, Border crossing and belonging in Canada: my challenge. I am using different fonts to represent the interaction of several voices I heard in Suzanne's story. Her narrative voice relays the events of her story. I have included her self-reflexive comments on her own feelings, thoughts, and narrative process indented in italics. She used another voice with an instructive tone to give me cultural information important to
Suzanne's Story

As we prepared to start the interview Suzanne laughed and told me her story would be boring. Her immigration process had been quite easy. I reassured her that I would not be bored, and that I wanted to include a range of experiences.

In Canada and at Home

I was not a lesbian in Europe. My first real relationship with a woman was in Canada when I came here just after university to study English. In fact, I was seeing a man at the time I left Switzerland. The love was there, but we were not thinking about settling down yet.

Something was not quite settled for me.

When I decided to study in Canada, we decided to open up the relationship. We agreed to have other lovers and promised each other open communication and safe sex. I remember saying, very lightly, without much thought

"I will never get involved with a man. I have had my man.

I don't need that. If anything I would get involved with a woman."

Looking back, I know I felt attractions to women long before I acknowledged
these feelings. I had crushes on professors and one very close girlfriend that I 
loved.

_I loved her, but I never found words to connect with the love._

I remember at 18, I was out jogging one morning,

I felt a rush as another woman met my eyes as we passed.

I remember pushing the thoughts out of my mind “Later. Not now.”

_I honestly do not know how I was able to split like that._

_It was constantly there, on some level,_

_but I never made the connection._

My family life was complicated.

Getting through school and coping with family took all my attention.

_Coming out as a lesbian had to come later._

_It was the least important thing for me to do._

In Canada, I became friends with another European woman at the same school, 
who was a lesbian. Things just started to fall into place.

_“okay, maybe I am a lesbian?”_

One of the teachers at the language school who was a lesbian fell for me. She 
asked if I was a lesbian. When I told her I did not know, she did not waste time 
waiting for me to become clearer. She went for another woman. _I was so pissed!_

_I knew I needed to know for myself_
I met a woman at a party and we got involved.

In the physical, I became clear.

When we had sex, I became absolutely clear.

The next morning it was like pieces of a puzzle coming together.

I felt like I was coming home.

*It is a bit textbook, I know, but that is how it felt.*

The sex was good, but it did not take long for the both of us to see that our lifestyles were too different for a relationship to work. That was fine with me; at that point I was not looking for a serious long-term relationship. I had decided very early on I was not going to get involved with someone just because I wanted sex and some cuddling.

Shortly after ending our affair, I received a call that my mother was sick and I needed to return to my home country.

"I can't go now. I just can't."

I had felt at ease in Canada from the moment I arrived.

As soon as I stepped outside the airport,

*into the light,*

*I had felt "I'm coming home."*

I had gotten everything in place: my acceptance at university, my visa, my research project. My mother was dying. I had to go. Even as I left I was checking into options for returning. I put everything on hold for that year and stayed with
my mother, caring for her and then grieving her.

I was clear from the beginning that I was going to go back to Canada, so I was not going to get involved with anyone. I was in no state to get involved with anybody. I did not make a conscious decision, but I put any kind of coming out on hold.

*It felt like too much.*

Along with caring for my mother, I was very embedded in my friendships. In my career, I was just starting to receive recognition as an artist and writer. It was a very full year without trying to take on something new.

I did have a few brief affairs there. I have always been very lucky in terms of affairs. I am just very open. I would meet a woman that I liked. After dropping a few hints, if she seemed open, I would let her know- "this is what I want."

My women friends at the time were all shocked. Stern faced, chin down "Bad Bad Bad!"

A lot of them came from Catholic schools.
Thinking back, my own Catholic upbringing may have, in a strange way, supported me in staying in relationships with men even when I was not feeling much sexual attraction for them. Sex is not supposed to be important for women; so, if I am not that interested in sex, I am doing something right. If I am not the hottest woman, well, they say that is good.

*For many years, it never really dawned on me that there might be something else.*

Later, I learned that there is actually a fairly strong, lesbian scene in my home country.

*It never crossed the borders to me*

Some of that I think has to do with class. My mother was a single, working woman. She did not have time to get involved with the women’s movement.

The women’s movement at that point, was more of an upper class and academic movement, and not realistic in terms of working women’s lives. Over the last decade or so they have started to extend into the working class, But at the time, as an emerging artist from a working class background, the women's movement, and lesbian movement were not particularly accessible to me.

It was through my mother, that I learned the value and challenge of being independent.
Women's rights came very late to my country. The last district had to be forced by federal law to give their women the right to vote in provincial matters in 1992.

My mother emigrated from a bordering country. She was always perceived as a foreigner, which is ridiculous because it is right across the border and they speak the same language. When my parents separated, she didn't know that women in our country did not have a right to separate assets. My father went through all of her assets. She could do nothing because at that point, according to the law, she was not allowed to work without his consent, to open a bank account without his consent, or to rent an apartment without his signature.

My mother wanted an easier life for me than she had had, and would have been happiest if I married and had children. Growing up, I had been determined to have the independence my mother had been denied. A career in the arts and academia were the only places where I saw the possibility of an independent life. They were male dominated fields, but they offered a greater degree of freedom for those women that could make it. As a woman in these fields you were something of an outcast, but at least you are an outcast with freedom.

Returning to Canada

While I was caring for and then grieving my mother, I was also giving a lot of thought to going back to Canada to finish the studies I had started. A friend introduced me to a Swiss and Canadian lesbian couple, Hanna and Jane who
invited me to stay with them and encouraged me to take advantage of the 6 month visa that I could get on arrival at the airport.

*We have a passport that is welcomed at borders.*

*I did not appreciate what that meant then.*

I entered Canada on a six-month visa, intending to find a way to stay longer. I was sure enough I brought my cat. The inheritance my mother had left me gave me the freedom to travel and stay in Canada. I was still quite drained from caring for my mother, and initially just rested and traveled. Then I settled into writing research grants that would allow me to continue my research. Through these grants, I was able to stay in Canada for a year and a half doing interviews and gathering materials for two different research papers.

I had several affairs with women in Canada, and then something, I cannot say what, shifted. I no longer wanted to have affairs.

*I wasn’t there anymore*

I have found communication about affairs, relationships, and sex much harder here in Canada. Yes, there was a lot of talk within the lesbian community about non-monogamy. But, for me, affairs are not just screwing around. It takes upfront, honest communication and respect to have open consent to intimacy without the long-term commitment. Both people have to know that they do not want to settle down or get more involved. I did not want to hurt anyone.

Feelings really are too special. I found with women I met in Canada it was either totally about sex, and nothing else, or they wanted to get involved. There did not seem to be any time of “let’s just see where it goes.” This is just my experience,
but it did not have the cleanness and openness I was used to in Europe. I got to a place in my life where I could not do it anymore. At the same time, you cannot force a relationship to happen just because you are ready for one, so deciding not to have affairs meant I had to come to terms with the possibility of being alone and of living without sex.

Deciding to Immigrate

I met my current partner while we were both volunteering at a museum. We had only been dating for three months when we faced a major decision. We were both feeling committed to the relationship and wanted to give it a chance to develop. However, the approaching expiry date on my visa did not give us this time. Although we knew about the H&C process, it seemed early relationship to be taking such a step. We both felt the pressure of choosing between rushing into a serious commitment …or having to separate. This was before the changes in the sponsorship laws, so we could apply without my partner sponsoring me. I felt better, not creating a legal obligation for her to support me. I honestly do not think we would have done it otherwise.

My Application Process

We were lucky to have a fairly easy application process but it was still stressful. The uncertainty of never knowing if you are going to be able to stay makes it stressful. You hand your application in to somebody else who can decide your life. It is a long, detailed application. Although the forms are straightforward, there is always some uncertainty
You may have missed something.

They may have changed something.

Do we have enough support letters? Enough photos?

The process impacted our relationship as well. Every argument we had made me worry.

"Is she going to pull out?"

Whether you acknowledge it or not, the application process creates a power difference. It creates a form of dependence in the relationship.

For me, any kind of dependency is horrible. I felt vulnerable with my partner and with the immigration system.

We reassured ourselves by making certain that we did the application properly. LEGIT was a lifesaver.

"If they can’t help you, no one can."

We were concerned about the support letters because there were no parents around anymore on my side. However, we were reassured by LEGIT that many people have parents who do not agree with the relationship, so quite often people do not have any letters from family. Instead we asked friends to write letters. I asked a friend of my mother’s to write a support letter. She wrote a lovely letter, even though she would really like to see me come back home and get married.

We were extremely lucky. My partner had good contacts in the women’s movement.
and we both had friends who were professionals, making it easy for us to get letters that had credibility. I do not know if immigration actually recognized the names, but it was reassuring.

As stressful as the application process was it was also an interesting chance to reflect on my life. It was not unlike a self-help seminar to find out what your life is about. The process involves thinking and writing about where you are at now, what has brought you there, and where you are going. It was interesting, looking at what I have done, putting things together, and looking at potential futures.

"Oh here are my marks and I did this"

"mmm this is an interesting person. "

"I’ve lived, you know!"

"Mmmm…this is very interesting, hmmm I’ve found something, I could do this."

We were concerned that because we had not been together very long at that point, the evidence in our application would not look like much. As we collected, however, we were surprised at how much we had. It really adds up: emails, photos from parties and weekends away, restaurant bills. At that point the application felt very doable and straightforward. I understood that they need proof, and I do not have a life that is in any way outrageous. If anything, looking over my file is probably either relaxing or boring.

Before the immigration process, I had taken my movement across borders for
granted. During the process, I experienced the absolute free-floating powerlessness of having someone else restrict my movement. I had gone down to Seattle to apply for a new student authorization. I did not realize that, because of the thousands of applications the Canadian consulate in Seattle processes, and the limited number of student authorizations they are allowed to give, they are far stricter about student authorizations than in Europe. When I had applied in Paris, I had used a letter stating that I intended to do research. In Seattle, you needed to prove you were registered in a school. I was an independent researcher with contacts at the University, but was not enrolled there. When I did not get my student visa, I had no way to get back into the country. I have never been in that situation, where I would not be able to get into a country. I was used to crossing borders unhampered. My country's passport opens doors.

"Oh, they really can say no. This is reality."

And this is what a lot of people experience. They cannot get into Europe or Canada.

This is the reality of all of a sudden being on the other side.

I had known this before, intellectually, but actually being in that position is very, very different. It felt horrible. At the same time, what is the worst that would have happened? I would have had to go back to Europe for a while. Really, how horrible is that? I think it is very different for people who come from a country where going back home would be totally different; difficult, or even dangerous. For me, my life would have been easier if I did go back. I always knew I had
other options: go home for a while and fly back, fly to New York and apply there. Options were there for me, maybe financially very costly, but options.

Once the application is in, you wait. The uncertainty and the fear sit with you and you wait. It felt like I was waiting for marks at school, constantly fearing that it might not be good enough. All you can do is wait and go on.

Rationally, I recognized the strength of my application: I was the right age, had a good education and profession, no criminal record, no medical problems, no debt. In fact, if I did not get it, they would have to explain why. Rationality did not matter, I felt fearful.

*I honestly do not know how I handled the fear.*

Not being able to do anything more was agonizing.

I kept it inside.

I acted it out.

I held onto my belief that what will happen, will happen.

My partner and I talked about our situation a lot.

My partner and I argued a lot

Somebody else is deciding your life and it is very challenging to just hang in there. I think it's really just about hanging in there; going on and facing that knowledge, that fear, that insecurity, and staying with it to the end.
I remember scrambling to get my visa renewed in order to be able to go to the US for an interview in Seattle. My current Visa was going to expire before the interview and I had exhausted extension options. Without a current Visa in my passport I might not be able to get back into Canada after the interview. My partner and I were imagining wild solutions: I would fly back to Europe, fly directly into the US, and then hope that I would get a new tourist Visa on arrival in Canada. I called LEGIT to get advice. LEGIT contacted an MP on my behalf. This MP called immigration, and within a few days I received a phone call "We heard you need a new Visa." After a few questions, the officer said "I'll have your Visa in the mail today."

*That was the first time I experienced that through connections in the right place, you can really move things.*

The interview went smoothly. The questions were simple and relevant; my profession, my education, what I wanted to do in Canada. There was nothing overly personal or embarrassing. I was in the room alone and at the end the officer said, “send my apology to your partner that we did not meet her.”

*Settling in(to) Canada: My struggle*

For most of the first two years after my resident status was granted I was
sheltered from the reality of trying to establish a career in Canada. I was still a graduate student at a University in Europe and returned for two extended visits. The first time I packed my things, reorganized my research committee, and prepared all the materials for my comprehensive exams. A year later I returned for four months to write my exams.

When I returned to Canada, I experienced the disorienting impact of intense culture shock and identity loss for the first time. I had had no time to rest after my exams. Within two days of arriving in Canada, I packed up my apartment, and moved into an unfamiliar, rougher, part of the city. I felt isolated and stuck there. A bus strike was on and I had no way to get around. The poverty and neglect in my area disturbed me, and I could not get away from it. I was out of touch with people after being engrossed in studying and then away for so many months. My degree was over, and I had no sense of what I was going to do next. It was disorienting to feel so disconnected, aimless, and discouraged.

It took me about half a year to even start to get a foothold. I slowly made contacts at a college, finding work as a German teacher. Later, I was hired on contract to do some research in my field. My greatest struggle has been to make a real living and build a career. I have work. I have always had work, but always short term, and often not in my field. I have been piecing together part time language teaching along with some research work.
It is an incredible loss for me because I worked extremely hard for my degree in Europe, but it does not have the same value or meaning here. I was breaking rules by getting a university degree. I came from a working class home with a single mom. There was no aspiration, support, or expectation from society that I would get a better education.

In my home country only 23 or 24 percent go to high school, the rest do apprenticeships.

I had completed an apprenticeship rather than an academic high school education. After completing an apprenticeship I went to high school for adults and then to university on my own, as a second education. People often asked me "Why should you do that? You are going to get married anyways."

I was already breaking so many rules to get there. By coming to Canada, I was basically throwing everything away.

I lost that recognition that I had been gaining as a writer and artist when I moved to Canada. It has been an incredible loss. My degree and my experience are simply not recognized here. The truth is, we do not do it differently back in Europe, we take our own people. It is a simple fact.

Here, I am now not our own people. Here, I am on the other side.

I find sometimes Canada is a little deceptive with immigrants, saying they can come, and that their skills are needed. You see it most with foreign trained doctors, an area I have done research on. I find it misleading to imply that they
will be allowed to practice.

This multiculturalism stuff—the reality is, if you do not speak the language, if you do not know the customs, you do not get a job, so let’s stop lying about all this, so called, “you can keep your culture.”

I have been struggling with this

for more than two years now,

and it is still a struggle.

At the same time, I have to say, I have always had work and I can see some progress. I am getting to teach credit courses now at the college. The next step will be trying to get to teach a credit course in my field.

Sometimes I am scared. I am getting older, and I have a fear of not having the energy to keep going and going.

There is a huge economic difference between the two countries. There, you work 40 to 42 hours a week. Here you have to work 75.

You have to work much harder here to maintain a decent standard of living. There, I could live comfortably, even enjoy holidays, on a clerical worker’s salary.

I cannot keep struggling the way I have to now

for another ten years.
I notice that as soon as I have work, I relax and other problems seem to fade into
the background. Building my career here really is my greatest, most important,
challenege.

*Border crossing and Belonging in Canada: My challenge*

I have been here 6 almost 7 years now, and a sense of belonging to communities
and having connections is coming. For several years I was not integrated either
through studies or work, so it has taken time and effort.

Just this month I went to a holiday lunch party at work, expecting not to know
anyone. It was a nice surprise to walk in and see three people that I knew from
different parts of my life. So, it is happening.

I met friends through a writing group and my partner and I have a good set of
lesbian friends, both together as well as through our own connections. We live
in a lesbian co-op, so even if we are not incredibly involved, it is nice having all
the lesbians around. My friendships are growing richer now that they are based
on knowing each other for a long time.

Having more rights and visibility as a lesbian is a big part of keeping me here in
Canada. Having grown up where my mother had no rights, and experiencing the
impact of not having rights makes me value the gay and lesbian rights we have
in Canada. Obviously there are still problems, but to a certain degree the law is
on our side. It gives me a sense of rootedness and safety that is very important to me.

In my home country, I am not given the rights I enjoy here as a lesbian, but I am also not a foreigner. It has been a trade.

*I could go back if I needed to*

*Knowing that is a comfort in the battle.*

*It makes the struggle easier, more doable.*

I was drawn to being a border crosser.

I have a very clear memory from when I was only two of sitting, staring at books lined up on a bookcase. My mother was a passionate reader and I could not wait to open that world. I remember a huge, heavy book with a picture of the North Pole and a discoverer. It was very clear to me that I wanted to explore.

I wanted to search beyond what is visible and what is known.

And I have. I have crossed the border gone beyond the comfort of what I have known, giving up safety and status.

I have taken the risk,

made the jump, with enthusiasm

Immigrating has made me see things differently,
Coming (out) to Canada

both in Europe and in Canada.

I see two sides,

two paths.

It sharpens your vision.

Being a border crosser opens your eyes to details, to beauty.

Had I known some of the struggles I have come up against, I am not certain I would have done it.

I sometimes think I have been arrogant in throwing away what I had after having to push to get the education I did. It is people who have parents, and income, and status who succeed in higher education. I have had to do it alone.

Without a home to go back to,

I feel an uprootedness now—in both places

that is frightening to me.

I am very careful about using the word fate or talking about God, but I know that I came here because I needed to. I needed to leave Europe, and getting out, in a sense, saved me. I was not literally in danger, but I needed to get out. Therefore, I have to trust that, since coming here was the right thing to do and I have followed through, there has to be a way for me to survive here, to make a living and a life. I have not done this lightly, or moved just out of daring. I needed to come here. Remembering this helps me meet the next challenge.

Coming to Canada was my adventure. My big life adventure, and it
probably will take almost everything I have in the end.

A hill or a mountain to climb,

can actually be something very beautiful

Researcher Reflections

I emphasize that my interpretation of Suzanne’s story has not been informed by the iterative and negotiated process that the other narratives were. As part of my interpretation, I discuss some of issues that I would raise with Suzanne in a joint interpretation meeting.

Suzanne’s statement that she was not a lesbian in Europe begins her construction of sexual self in her narrative. The claim to not hold an identity that she holds now simultaneously begins her explanation of how this disruption happened and creates an ambiguity of sexual self. She narrates the beginning of her lesbian sexual self as starting in Canada with her first relationship with a woman, and then reflects on her past. She makes meaning of the disruption in her sexual self through her narration of several events in her past. She speaks of loving a man, and assures me of the authenticity of the love the lack of sexual desire she felt. She also narrates having recognized sexual desire for women. She understands the disruption as a failure to make connections between her feelings for women and the possibility of relationships with women, alluding to the impacts of heterosexist erasure. She also understands the disruption as a “split” within herself, drawing on modern notions of a core self. In Canada, greater personal freedom and meeting lesbians help her to construct a possible lesbian self. She narrates her first sexual experience with a woman using metaphorical language, “coming home,” “becoming clear,” and “pieces of a puzzle coming together,” that suggests confirmation
and integration. I interpreted her self-conscious joke about her "textbook" story, as both recognition of the coming out story in her own story, and as an appeal for the authenticity of her story.

Her story provides only a brief glimpse of her struggle to enact her lesbian self in her home country. She begins her story, "I was not a lesbian in (home country)" She explains her decision to put "coming out on hold" when she returns to Europe in terms of family and career demands. For Suzanne, it was making contact with a lesbian community that constituted being a lesbian, and "coming out." She does not narrate her affairs with women as examples of being a lesbian in her home country. Her home country is never a place where her lesbian self is at home. She voices the judgments of her friends "Bad, Bad, Bad," when she has brief affairs with women. She also narrates her Catholic upbringing, emphasizing the impact of religious discourses on her own, and other women's sexualities. She does not explicitly discuss these oppressive forces as reasons for not coming out as a lesbian, but I interpreted her narration of these events as examples of her struggle to do so, given the presence of these homophobic and heterosexist moral discourses. In a joint interpretation session, I would want to ask Suzanne to discuss the meaning of these parts of her story for her. When she narrates her life in Canada, in contrast, she claims lesbian without qualification or distance. In Canada, she emphasizes and values the greater rights and community she enjoys as a lesbian here.

I noticed independence emerging as a theme in Suzanne’s self narrative during the interview. As I worked with the interview text, I noticed ways that Suzanne produces her self as someone who has worked against the limits of class and gender oppressions to be
able to claim independence. She builds this value of independence as integral to the self she constructs around her position as a daughter of a working-class, immigrant, single mother. Linking this value of independence to her childhood, and carrying it through her story, creates continuity in her self-narrative.

Values of independence and freedom cohere her working-class daughter, career, and lesbian selves. In constructing her career and lesbian selves, Suzanne has defied oppressive social conventions and institutions, and made sacrifices, in order to gain independence and freedom. She emphasizes ways that achieving an education defied societal expectations and educational institutions that entrench the class system. In the interview, she took up and parodied the voices of those who challenged or questioned her pursuit of an education. She frames her career path as a decision to occupy an outsider’s position in a male dominated field, sacrificing belonging and social acceptance, to gain more freedom. Suzanne gives up social acceptance and security by not marrying, voicing the conflicting wishes of her mother and her childhood self. I made the link between independence and Suzanne’s lesbian sexual self, in part, because of her discussion of her affairs with women. She emphasized her preference to stay out of committed relationships and articulated clear distinctions among her desires for sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy. She emphasizes the pleasure and freedom she experiences in her sexual relationships with women. Her parodies the moral judgments of her women friends, and the limiting discourses around women’s sexual pleasure from the Catholic Church that have challenged her reinforce themes of defying convention for greater freedom in her story.
Suzanne narrates coming to Canada as giving her greater personal freedom, perhaps implying that she needed this freedom to make changes in her life. For the first time she was away from her chaotic family life. She leaves behind the legal and religious constraints placed on her as a woman in her home country when she comes to Canada. She speaks of Canada as a place where she instantly felt at home, emphasizing open spaces and air. Towards the end of the interview, Suzanne suggests that coming to Canada was necessary for her emotional survival.

The immigration process places Suzanne’s much valued freedom at stake. She describes her struggle with entering into relationships of dependence with both her partner and Immigration Canada. In narrative content she works to minimize this dependence, emphasizing that a relationship of financial independence would have been unacceptable to her. Her narrative process, telling her story almost exclusively with I rather than we, constitutes and is constitutive of Suzanne’s autonomy in her self-narrative. Her almost exclusive use of I may also reflect concerns she had about not infringing on her partner’s confidentiality, something she was cognizant of as we began the interview.

Suzanne narrates her immigration to Canada as a series of trade-offs. During the immigration process she discovers, experientially, ways that she is privileged as a first world woman. In Canada, she gains greater rights and freedom as a woman and lesbian. She is thoroughly embedded in a lesbian community and acknowledges that the rights she enjoys here as a lesbian have influenced her decision to stay. However, in her career she has lost the privileged position of being an insider. She struggles against the loss of status and limits to her career development she is experiencing in Canada as an immigrant.
outsider. Suzanne questions the wisdom of sacrificing the gains her hard-won higher education would have brought her in her home country, and expresses doubts about her ability to sustain herself financially as an outsider.

Towards the end of our interview, a new voice emerges that makes meaning of this loss and reframes her struggle. She creates a personal metaphor of self as border crosser. As a border crosser she is able to perceive more sharply. Her eye for detail, problems and possibilities, and beauty are enhanced, as she sees from multiple dual perspectives. While elaborating on this metaphor, she speaks of her struggle as an adventure and brings in the image of climbing a mountain, making perseverance in struggle something beautiful.
Leslie

_Narrative Context and Process_

Leslie’s story begins in her home country in Asia in the 1980s. She began her story at age 6 and told it through to 27 her age at the time of the interview. At the time of our first interview Leslie had received confirmation that her application was being processed but had not received permanent residence status. We met for 2 interpretive sessions, the first, 1 month after the initial interview, the second, 5 months later, at which point she had received her permanent residence status. In her interview Leslie referred to her home country as Asia to protect her confidentiality. I have maintained this convention and changed or omitted other identifying details.

I have structured the story into five parts: Growing up, Coming to Canada, Applying to immigrate, Waiting for status, Acceptance. I have woven several voices into Leslie’s story. In addition to the co-constructed first person narrative voice, I have used indented italicized text to include Leslie’s self-reflexive voice in her own words. These portions reflect her direct speech from the interview or interpretive sessions. I have omitted sub-verbal speech acts such as ums and ahs and inserted punctuation for ease of reading, but they are otherwise unchanged from the interview transcript.

Leslie told significant portions of her story through remembered conversations and composite or hypothetical dialogues. Text in quotation marks are therefore Leslie’s words, again punctuated and minimally edited for ease of reading. In places, I have constructed the dialogues as scenes using script writing conventions. The titles and stage
directions of the imagined scenes are taken from the entry talk Leslie used to set up the
scene.

Leslie’s Story

I started getting into realizing
about my likes and dislikes sexually...
or genderly...
however way you want to call it
from a very young age
A very very young age

and a lot of people ask: When was your first crush?
I always go: Oh you won't believe me anyways if I tell you.
and they'll be like: No, I will.
and I say: Well, basically it was in kindergarten, so I was like six years old.
and they'll go: Well everybody goes through that, right? You have your crushes... you like people in school, you like your teacher people go through that
I said: No, something was different and I knew it then.

and the reason I knew it then
was that I was shy talking about it
but, then again also in Asia people didn't talk about it

I was scared of it
to be quite honest
I was scared to label it
I was scared of what it might mean

I was struggling
I took refuge in silence. At home I kept to myself. Jealously resenting the privileges my two older brothers enjoyed, fueled my rebellion against all I was told about being a girl. I watched my brothers grow up accustomed to being the center of attention, tended and fussed over, while I was scrutinized and restricted. Growing up in the shadows of my brothers heightened my sensitivity to unfairness.

My mother enforced discipline in the house with a quick temper and a cane. I survived by staying attuned to my mother’s shifting moods, watching vigilantly for flare ups, and retreating to my room. My brothers and I formed a protective bond, watching out for each other and working together to tend our mother’s anger. I girded myself in order to endure punishments when I sensed they were coming. I knew as boys my brothers got much worse.

I dove into school. At school, I stepped comfortably into being a tomboy: being athletic, moving with confident strides, feeling stronger. It was like a jumpsuit I could slip on, connecting with the same kind of power my brothers enjoyed. I do not think I saw it that way at the time, but that is what I think was happening. I remember being like two different people at home and at school. At home I felt alone and unsafe, struggling against the restrictions placed on me as a girl. At school, I was an active and involved student, fiercely loyal and protective of my friends.

SCENE: My First cloud nine moment

SETTING: Age 12, On the phone with my best friend
She: I have something to tell you
Leslie: What?
She: No, no, no... I can't tell you.

*I remember it distinctly because it’s the first time I ever.
This is my first cloud nine moment...EVER*

She: No. I can't tell you.
Leslie: WHAT?
She: ..um..I love you.
Leslie: Click. and she hangs up

And this is the person that I’d always had a crush on since I was eight years old.

We were very good friends and I still had a crush on her.

*And I was on cloud NINE for...forEVER really.*

*At fourteen*

It wasn’t uncommon at my Christian all-girls school for girls to have crushes on each other. I knew the signs. First, you start noticing one of the girls, usually one of the more tomboyish girls at school, hanging around waiting for the other after classes, offering to carry her books, holding doors for her, even bringing roses or chocolates to her at school. If the other girl accepted the attention the two would become inseparable. Everyone would know. Yet no one would ever speak about it directly.

I remember the one time that I came closest to opening up to my friends. I was hanging out on the third floor balcony with Joan and Lynn after class. Looking over the banister, I was thrilled to see Ellen, a girl I had a crush on,
walking across the courtyard below. Seeing the two girls strolling with Ellen, I nudged Joan and gave a mischievous grin.

“Look who’s here.” nodding towards the girl on Ellen’s right, who Joan had been flirting with for weeks. Joan didn’t return the grin.

“What are you talking about?” She snapped.

“It’s okay.” I reassured her. “I sometimes have those feelings too.”

“You actually think that way?” In chorus, their tone conveyed shock and disgust. I immediately regretted opening up. Quickly changing my tone, I laughed it off as if I had been joking all along. I had come too close, wanting desperately to know if others shared my feelings. These friends were my support, my refuge, I could not risk alienating or losing them. As close as I felt towards them, I always felt a little distant too. I was locked in my suspicion that I was different, odd, maybe even abnormal.

Ill and abnormal were the only explanations that I had seen for my feelings. I had heard my father condemning the moral depravity of homosexuals, but was not even sure that that was what I was. Sometimes I wondered if I had been meant to be a boy. Mostly I hoped my feelings would change. Alone in confusion, I did not know how to begin to talk about my fears.

At Seventeen

I was devoted to Sue. I would call her first thing in the morning. We would meet between classes, walk home together, and make up excuses to see each other in the evenings. I loved our last phone call of the evening and would drift to sleep hearing Sue’s voice. Sue was the most important person in my life, yet the possibility of a future together with her had never occurred to me.
Eventually marrying a man was the future that was laid out for me. I heard it in my parents’ advice, in my classmates’ growing concerns over finding steady boyfriends, and in the increasing pressure from Edmund to take our “dates” more seriously and commit to him. I loved hanging out with him, but could not think of him as anything more than a friend. For years I had half expected, even hoped, that I would start liking boys. I assumed that somewhere along the way I would change, find a man I was attracted to, and marry. It was what women do. I was becoming clearer that marriage would not work for me, yet no other options were apparent. Being alone was the clearest future I could imagine for myself and so I was beginning to resign myself to living alone for a very long time.

When my father first offered me the opportunity to go study in Canada, I rejected the idea. I could not imagine being separated from Sue for that long. But as the school term progressed I began to reconsider. Living apart would be difficult, but might, in the long term, offer an alternative to the secret existence we were living now. Uncomfortable with our intense friendship, Sue’s strict Protestant parents had forbidden Sue from spending time with me. Our relationship could not survive the sneaking around forever. University would mean intensified pressure on both of us to stop wasting time on what people saw as a girlhood crush, start dating boys, and find a husband. Perhaps getting away from the claustrophobic scrutiny here would give Sue and I a chance to survive.

*I don't ever want to go but if we are ever to survive
if WE as a couple, and me as a lifestyle is ever going to survive,
we have to take it outside of here*
The time apart would be a sacrifice for a possible future together. When I talked with Sue about the plan I told her how much our relationship meant to me.

"I'm serious about us. I don't know about you, but I'm ready." Sue was worried that our parents would find out.

"If they did—and it was a matter of giving up my parents and giving up you—I'm willing to leave my parents. You mean that much to me. And if they can't understand that, it would be like them disowning me—giving me up."

Coming to Canada

I now wander if the decision to come to Canada to save the relationship was the biggest mistake, or the best mistake I ever made. My relationship with Sue did not survive the separation, but for me coming to Canada opened up new possibilities.

*I don't think North America made me a whole new person.*

*I think what being in North America allowed me to do was to delve into options that I was looking for but that didn't seem available in (Asia).*

Looking back I can see that although Sue had reassured me that she was also ready to commit to a future together, her actions indicated otherwise. We had planned that Sue would join me in Canada once I graduated from high school. However, Sue followed her parents' wishes and attended a university in the Southern hemisphere instead. I was deeply hurt that Sue was unwilling to even try to persuade her parents to send her to Canada or at least North America. After the sacrifice I had made, her decision felt like rejection. Not only would we not be in
the same country, but our school holidays would not even coincide. I managed to
make several trips to visit Sue in my first few years in Canada, keeping these trips
secret from my parents.

It was on the second of these trips that I became suspicious that Sue had
started dating a man. Friends, even restaurant waitstaff, kept asking Sue
"Where’s Dave?" I felt humiliated, angry too, that the significance of my
relationship with Sue was completely invisible to all of these people. Sue was
distracted and unenthusiastic, seeming to have forgotten how important we had
once been to each other. I still loved Sue and made allowances for her behaviour.
Returning to Canada, I remained in agonizing, hopeful contact with Sue.

When I look back I still struggle with how to understand my relationship
with Sue and its drawn out ending. I wonder how Sue could deny the significance
of our relationship. The denial of the relationship feels like a denial of me. I
question how Sue’s feelings could change so dramatically. I mistrust my own
judgment. The shift in her feelings resurfaces the belief that I grew up with, that
relationships between women are just a phase, fundamentally immature, and
insecure. I wonder what would have happened to me if I had stayed home to be
closer to her. Would I have been able to stand up to the social pressure. The
break up plays into my fears that I will not be able to create a lasting relationship
with any woman, that either I am incapable, or that social pressure will eventually
destroy any relationship I have.

I was alone in the student lounge of my residence, crying after a phone call with
Sue. I tried to hide my face in my book when Hugh walked in. I got along well with
Hugh, a fellow international student from Asia, but I was in no shape to talk. He seemed genuinely concerned when he asked me what was going on. I hesitated, not sure how much to say, and then hinted at relationship problems and feeling rejected. Hugh shifted uncomfortably and mumbled something about just being friends.

"It's not that you're not attractive—I just don't feel the same way about you."

"What?" Not sure of what she was hearing, I wondered what to say next. Nothing to lose at this point. Confusion and sadness gave way to the anger I had been containing for months.

"Get over yourself. It's not YOU. The reason why I'm crying is because I lost my partner of over five years...and it's a SHE. Don't like it LEAVE now. Like it, want to stay, be my friend? Do it. Whatever."

I was that angry at myself, angry at the world angry at the fact that I had come over here and ... angry at the fact that she was with a man not with a woman angry at the fact that she had lied to me over and over and over and over again angry that I had subjected myself to that kind of abuse going to visit her and having this still going on ...angry at everything really

and at that point I thought all I really needed was for me to be able to tell to be open about who I am and to not have people run away from me

and if he's going to be as shallow as everyone else that I think is then go ahead and do it I honestly could not...at that time...could give anything else to it
He stayed. His stunned silence melted into awkward concern. At a loss for words, he mentioned a cousin of his who he was very close to who also “had tendencies.”

In a few weeks Hugh introduced me to his cousin, Angela. We became friends, an unspoken understanding connecting us. Sitting outside on a sunny summer day, Angela started talking about meeting a woman. Then stopped.

“You know ... I don't know if you want to know this stuff.”

My silence invited Angela to continue. We were sitting side by side leaning up against a tree. Neither of us turned to look at the other. In backlit profile, Angela told me, without telling. Her words were carefully abstract, intentionally oblique. I understood, and without breaking the quiet connection, let her know I was the same.

It was also during the year of my long-distance break-up with Sue that I met Terry. A woman in her forties and mother of two, Terry, was one of the first open lesbians I had met in Canada, and the first person with whom I had trusted to openly talk about my feelings for women. I was enjoying our growing friendship. Terry, however, was clear that she was interested in more. If I say I was “roped into” an affair with Terry am I denying my responsibility for my own actions? I wonder if it is fair to say I was seduced into one. It was the first time a woman had been attracted to me. I was used to pining away for years before receiving the smallest gesture of affection. Being wanted was a rush. Still, I remained hopeful that Sue and I would work things out. I still loved her. I thought I was clear that I was committed to working things out with Sue, thought that I was setting limits with Terry, but Terry did not seem to take those limits seriously. I wonder if I was too indirect or did not feel entitled to say no. Perhaps losing the one link I had with lesbian life in the city was too great a risk.
I remember feeling utterly alone in my confusion around my tumultuous overseas relationship with Sue, the strange and pressured relationship I had with Terry, and my whole future. Feeling lost and adrift in a foreign country where no one really knew me, my isolation fed into hopelessness. I pulled myself out of depression by turning inwards and challenging myself.

I had to be honest with myself
Ok what’s been bothering you?
You have to make choices
You cannot sit and just not deal with it
Because lots of things are impacted by you
You’re not being truthful with yourself

I was loosing myself
My sense of myself

I had to force these things
I had to sit down
I had to call into question my identity
I had to call myself on so many issues
That was a turning point

My introspection crystallized into heightened clarity and nascent trust in myself.

I remember this period as the time when I started to trust others as well. I remember a conversation where I reconnected by telephone with Michelle, an old high school friend now studying in the States. Grounded by talking to someone who had known me for years, and sheltered by the distance between us, I began talking more freely. Still tentative, I described the problem a friend was having, confessing my break up with Sue in the third person.

“That must be horrible for you.” Michelle understood implicitly. “That must be really horrible for you.”
I felt the burden of her secret lift from my body and trust take root. I continued to share my story, now using I.

Although at the time I didn’t realize it, this period was also the early beginnings of my relationship with my current partner Bo. I laugh now at how oblivious I was to the early signs of attraction. Bo and I had been classmates together in their first two years of college in Canada and had maintained a friendship when we both transferred over to University; we played on the same intramural hockey team and went to cheap movie nights together. Although I had not openly talked about my feelings for women with Bo, I was comforted by the fact that one of Bo’s sister’s friends was, I suspected, queer. Again, we had never actually spoken about it. Bo knew bits and pieces of my situation, but not the whole story. She had met Terry, but because of the age difference assumed we were just friends. She knew that I had taken extended trips that I kept secret from my parents, but didn’t know why. I had never actually come out to Bo, and was not certain how much she had figured out for herself.

Bo, her sister and friends and I ended up hanging out quite a lot together. One evening a group of us were chatting in the living room. Bo’s sister aimed a joke at me that made it clear to everyone in the room that she knew that I was queer. Livid at being exposed this way, I stormed out of the living room. I fumed the entire way home. How could Bo’s sister not understand my need to protect myself? Controlling how much to share and with whom was my last security. Bo’s sister had just ripped that away from me. At home still fuming, I pointedly
ignored the concerned messages Bo was leaving every twenty minutes. On the fifth call I relented and picked up.

"I’m sorry. My sister’s such an ass."

We talked until 2 am.

After that evening, Bo started calling me almost every day and our friendship deepened. Ironically, it was Terry who first noticed Bo’s attraction for me.

“Do you realize Bo likes you?”

“We’re friends. We hang out together, that’s all. She’s not into women.”

“No trust me. I know these things. She’s interested. Bo acts differently when you’re around. Tries to dress up when you’re around. Gets fluttery when you’re around. Don’t you notice these things?”

“No…” I honestly hadn’t. Maybe not being used to being wanted made me oblivious to the signs. Maybe I was too wrapped up in my own confusion to see the signs. The signs were subtle though, and it would be two more years before Bo made her interest known to me.

I remember that Bo and her sister, seeing my emotional struggle, had contacted a Catholic priest who offered spiritual counselling about sexuality. Not knowing that I was still mourning the loss of my relationship with Sue and struggling with how to extract myself from the Terry’s push for more commitment, they had assumed that I was depressed because I could not reconcile my faith and my sexuality. Touched by their concern and reassured of their connection, I opened up to Bo about my long-distance break up with Sue and my struggle to get out of a relationship that should have never
happened in the first place. The support and understanding I got from Bo was solid. She was always there.

Meeting women like Angela and Terry gave me a glimmer of hope during the disorienting break up with Sue. Before, my only dreams for my future had been with Sue. Now I was beginning to see glimpses of a possible future, even without Sue. Before I came to Canada, Sue had been the only woman I could be open about my feelings with. I did not know any women friends who would identify or even come close to identifying as lesbians or queer. In Canada, I had at least a handful of friends who I could say were queer.

I had other queer women to hang out with, chat with, and go out with to the clubs. Nights dancing at the clubs were always odd experiences. The clubs were a place to recognize and be recognized; to see other women like me and be seen by women like me-- to exist. At the same time, being there was somewhat alienating. Loud music, showing off on the dance floor, smokey, boozy clubs were not my scene. I didn’t feel at ease at these clubs. An ideal evening out would be a movie or chatting with a group of friends over wine, but these evenings didn’t offer that same sense of making contact with a big group of queer women, of having a public space. So I went to the clubs. Contact without connection was better than no contact at all.

As graduation approached I had to make a decision about whether to stay in Canada despite the fact that my original motivation for coming here was gone. I had started liking Canada on its own merits. The less hectic pace of life, the wider sense of space, the daily connection with nature and fresh air were grounding. Ultimately though,
it was the relationships I had established with people here that gave me the impetus and courage to stay in Canada. I continued with my studies, with a view to building the educational credentials and work skills I would need to make a successful application for permanent residency in Canada.

I was well aware of the challenge I would be taking on in making an independent application for permanent residency here. I would be assessed on a points system that privileged first-world language skills, education, and work experience. My fluency in English would earn substantial points, as would a Canadian university education. In my calmer moments I could look at my prospects, and know that once I graduated, I would have an exceptional application, virtually airtight.

The day-to-day grind of working to financially support myself through my education stirred up doubts, insecurity, and instability. As an international student my tuition was three times the rate for Canadian residents. I was limited to taking on-campus jobs. Trying to maintain the required savings $10,000 when I was working for $8.00 an hour, $15.00 at best, seemed impossible. Classmates seemed to assume that international students came with large bank accounts provided by their parents. It was difficult for me to be patient when they questioned me about why I was working so many hours, why I couldn’t go out on weekends, had to give up my car and look for a cheaper apartment.

Insecurity played into my doubts and fears. If I could not support myself here, I would have to return. My options there seemed limited.

*I have no networks there at all*
*I've been gone for 8 to 9 years*
*I have NO friends there who know about me – save one.*

*I am not even anywhere in that culture*
because I left ...
I left at a time when I didn't know about that subaltern culture
that apparently is fairly vibrant now
I don't know
I heard about it
I don't know anyone there
How would I start?

and again I'm going to be living in an environment
where everything I do is about face value
and reflects upon my grandmother my grandfather my parents
...my everything right

...and I live in a culture
that could very easily NOT give me a job
because of my sexuality
or my having to hide it again
in order to get a job
and play... do the whole game

The years I had spent in Canada had been an opportunity to establish relationships
as Leslie, not Leslie the daughter, the granddaughter, or the sister. Here I was Leslie,
unencumbered. The responsibility of carrying my family’s reputation with each step was
sitting more gently, lifting. I could get to know people without the obligation of saving
family face permeating each interaction. I could choose what to share and reveal of
myself, when, and how to introduce my connections, my family, and my background. In
relationships this independence felt weightless, disorientating, then expansive, then
gradually solid again.

The importance of Bo’s presence in my life became clearest in its absence. Away
visiting my brother in Europe, I began to question and clarify my feelings for Bo. I
recognized that I missed our daily conversations. Bo had always been the one to initiate
phone calls, first thing in the morning and often again night. I had to ask myself whether
I would miss a friend so much.
A Close Brush with Death

My brother almost drove us both off a cliff basically.
We stopped.
No, we SKIDDED to a stop
by the edge of the cliff
by about half an inch,
because he was driving like a mad man.

And after that ..the first thing I wanted to do

when I got to a train station
was to call her.

Even after returning to Canada, I did not talk with Bo about my feelings.

Bo also said nothing. We hung out with a group of friends who were openly out,
and who knew that I was queer. These friends got used to seeing us together.

Without either of us talking about what it meant, Bo became more physically
affectionate with me; at first sitting closer, then touching arms, then more. The
relationship grew and intensified. Somehow we just knew we would be together

The next summer, I returned to Europe to visit with my brother again. Over the
phone, Bo told me

“I have a surprise for you when you get back.”

I returned home to discover Bo had moved in. She had packed a suitcase with her
clothes, moved out of her sister’s apartment, packed away some of my things to make
room and hung her clothes in the closet.

“We didn’t talk about this.”
I shouldn’t have been so stunned. I had been complaining for months about the amount of time we had been wasting shuffling by bus between apartments, dropping Bo off at her sister’s at midnight, coming back.

“Why would your sister be pissed at you if you decided to just stay?” I had challenged Bo.

I should not be surprised that Bo had taken the challenge to heart. I let the significance of the move sink in. Without ever speaking about being in a relationship, we had moved from dating to living together. I recognized the courage the move had taken on Bo’s part, and was touched by the love it showed.

“Are you sure about this”?

After several months sharing a cramped apartment Bo and I decided to look for a place together. We could still only afford a one-bedroom, but perhaps something with a bit more space. I was chilled by some of the questions, assumptions, and outright discrimination Bo and I experienced while house hunting. Places that were available would suddenly be rented out. Landlords would tell us that an apartment was more appropriate for a married couple. We would be warned about food smells and asked why two sisters would want a one-bedroom apartment. I found dealing with discrimination harder, more confusing, when the assumptions behind the discrimination were unclear: are people reacting based on racist assumptions? Because we are women? Asian women? Because they see us as a couple or because they cannot see us as a couple? Because we are queer? The slipperiness was disorienting. After seeing Bo’s distress, I became very protective and in your face. I started being very blunt when I called prospective landlords.

A sentence in my brother Mathew’s e-mail caught my attention.
We have a spare room for you and Bo whenever you can come to visit us.

This one sentence —slipped in casually among chat about his new job, how he and his wife were settling into their new city, a description of their new apartment—told me that he knew and understood my relationship with Bo. Through our long distance phone calls and e-mails he had heard, without me telling him directly, that Bo and I were together. His invitation and assumption that we would travel together, would want a room together, confirmed that he accepted us as a couple. I was careful to match the casual tone in my reply—

Sounds great--maybe this summer.

When my grandmother visited I was happy to see that she and Bo got along well. Clarity was sometimes lost in the blend of Cantonese, Mandarin and English that they pieced their conversations together with, but Bo was very caring and respectful and Grandmother treated Bo with warmth. I used a walk with my Grandmother and a talk over coffee at a café in the heart of the gay district as an opportunity to test the waters a little.

“You know you might notice a lot of different looking people walking up and down the street.” I started in Mandarin.

We got into a bit of a conversation about the people and the neighborhood and I gradually led into asking what she thought about these things and lifestyles.

“You shouldn’t be so patronizing.” The admonishment was still affectionate.

“When I was younger I travelled in the world. I have seen all kinds of things, drag queens, people like that…”
"So, you'd be okay if... um if uh... you know, one of your grandchildren was with... like... if one of your grandsons was with another man or if I was with another woman. You'd be okay with it?"

"Oh, I'm so old already nobody gives a crap what I think anyways. If you're happy and the person is nice..."

Now, when I call, my Grandmother follows her inevitable question “When are you getting married?” with “How’s Bo?” For me, the important thing is she likes Bo.

I had been quite involved with the church and its choir since I arrived in Canada. Even though I disagreed with many of the church’s teachings, I valued the weekly reminder of my spirituality. The familiarity of the rituals was reassuring. Mostly, I loved the singing. I was touched when the church committee had offered to create an administrative position for me in order to help me stay in the country. It meant a lot to me that they wanted me to be able to stay in Canada.

Choir was like a big family. Every week the women in the choir meet, like aunts, they would fuss over the younger women in the choir, asking “Oh who are you dating?” ..or joking with each other about husbands and boyfriends. Having to remain silent and on the outside of this conversation had become too uncomfortable.

\[
I \text{ have no space to say any of that}\\
I \text{ CANT say any of that}\\
How \text{ do you even start to talk about you and your queer partner...}\\
You \text{ can't}
\]

I felt stuck as permanently immature, asexualized and too young to have a boyfriend. I needed to start removing myself from places where I had to hide. I struggled with my decision. It saddened me that I could not explain my reasons for leaving in a way that the women in the choir would even begin to understand. I have decided to maintain my spirituality outside the church for now. At some point I may look for a church where I
can be accepted, but it would have to be real acceptance, not love the sinner hate the sin. I know a lot of people who would say “WHAT? You were CATHOLIC? WHAT? and you’re QUEER?” It is not an easy combination for people to understand, but my relationship with God has been an important part of my life. Knowing that God valued me and had reasons for making me the way I am has helped me survive my struggles.

I acknowledge that the way I grew up, the strictness of my family, my culture, and my religion, has a lot to do with how I am. I know a lot of people might say “What do you mean you don’t have any tattoos?” I do not fit a lot of the stereotypes of queer—the tattoos, floating around clubs, picking up women, and having flings. I acknowledge that the experiences I carry may have a lot to do with why I am not that particular kind of queer person. I am just who I am with my own baggage and experiences. Through these I choose not to do some things and I choose to do some things. If anything I have just wanted to be allowed to be who I am and it so happens that I am a queer person.

Applying to Immigrate

When I submitted my application for permanent residency under the independent class, I took comfort in the fact that I documented a “text-book” perfect case. I had the language points, 18 points for my degree, proven ability to adapt to life in Canada. I was doing it already: had friends, had a partner, a place to live, work contacts ready the moment I was allowed to work. I was established and connected already. In calm moments I was confident I would get status. I even minimized the significance to a mere piece of paper giving official permission for me to continue the life I had already created in Canada.
Much more was at stake now however. Denial or rejection would threaten not only my own ability to live in Canada, but my relationship with Bo as well. Living back in my home country as a single queer woman, hidden, was difficult to imagine. Trying to make it as a couple there seemed impossible. I suspected Bo would not even be able to stay in the country, or be allowed to work. Even if she could, would she want to? How would we handle the discrimination we would face there? I worried about the impact of not being able to tell others about our relationship, of having our only support be a hidden community revolving around dark clubs and secret meetings.

I imagined the impossibility of enjoying a quiet, special dinner in a restaurant with Bo. We would want to dress up, but that might attract the wrong kind of attention. We would have to watch our eye contact, not hold hands, behave as sisters or roommates would. When I let this scenario unravel, I imagine patrons glaring at us, becoming hostile, even violent. I picture management hurrying us out the door, insisting they leave before even finishing the meal.

*I wouldn't want to subject the both of us to having to go under.*  
*I wouldn't want to subject myself to it because I know what it's like.*  
*But more importantly, because I know what it's like*  
*I wouldn't want to subject her to it.*  
*I know how much it can really screw around with your mind, with your mentality, your sanity, your own self-esteem and your own well-being.*  
*I think it would totally crush us.*

*I think it would totally put a bent on the relationship.*

Sept 11, 2001. In New York City two planes were piloted by hijackers into the heart of American commerce. As the world-trade towers collapsed, America’s illusions
of the invulnerability of their homeland crumbled. Talk of North American security perimeters rose. Canadian immigration policy, in the planning for years, veered towards homogenization and integration with the US. The new policy, although titled the “Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act” emphasized prevention of terrorism through strict screening measures and increased powers to enforcement officers. The policy was whipped together and pushed through parliament. Canadian consulates overseas were advised to scrutinize applications more carefully and be ready to implement the new policy in less than six months.

The new, more restrictive policies frightened me. No clear information was available on how applications already in process would be handled. I heard stories of people who should have qualified being turned down for ridiculous reasons. My confidence in my application dissolved and my anxiety soared. Much more was at stake now than just my own future.

From some friends, a lesbian couple from Malaysia, I learned about a process that same-sex partners of Canadian permanent residents were using to apply for permanent residency based on an appeal on Humanitarian and Compassionate grounds. My friends told me horror stories about the arduous application process, and the fact that their lawyers fees were $5000—money I simply did not have. Through another friend, Bo heard about a group called LEGIT, the Lesbian and Gay Immigration Taskforce. This group apparently offered free information on immigration for same-sex couples. I was skeptical initially, but eventually Bo persuaded me to try going to a meeting.
I remember walking into the first meeting with trepidation. Fears about having to be open at the meeting when I did not yet have status fed my unease. As introductions went around the circle, my apprehension eased. Relief and hope mixed with elation.

*I suddenly felt*
*I'm in the ROOM*
*with a whole BUNCH of other people.*
*I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE!*

The meeting itself was extremely reassuring. My questions were answered without me having to ask. Energized and hopeful, Bo and I filled out the forms and sent in an H&C amendment to my application.

Filling out the application itself was disconcerting. I felt some reassurance that the process existed. Same-sex couples were recognized in immigration practice, although not yet in immigration law, and only as a special category.

**SCENE:** You're a special category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imagined faceless immigration official:</th>
<th>You're a SPECIAL category.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applicant:</td>
<td>Special?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imagined faceless immigration official:</th>
<th>Well (patronizing tone), we have laws that say you can live your sexual orientation. Therefore, we cannot discriminate against you. We cannot say that we do not want to have you here. We have laws, so we will allow you to apply (self-congratulatory tone).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

A humanitarian policy that seemed to acknowledge the difficulties that queer people face, felt contradictory with immigration practices that made it clear that that the government did not understand what it means to be queer and from a country where that is illegal. *Where being me could get me thrown in jail.*
The forms and the process require you to out yourself. They ask for detailed information about the past—every job or school you have been at, a letter describing the relationship, evidence like joint property, memberships or bank accounts, along with supporting letters from family and friends. It was clear that Canadian Immigration did not understand the implications of officially reporting your sexual orientation. Knowing that this information would be seen by an anonymous immigration official, kept on record forever, left me feeling exposed and vulnerable. The process reflected a complete incomprehension of cultural differences around speaking about sexuality. I was fearful about asking family members to write about my relationship with Bo, but anticipated that my application would be weak without them. I was angry at the hypocrisy of a country that espoused and celebrated its official multiculturalism and yet maintained a discriminatory immigration policy. The tolerance and appreciation of diversity that Canadians prided themselves on felt hollow.

I did work up the nerve to ask my brother, by e-mail, to write a support letter. I explained that I needed to strengthen my independent application, I explained the process and explained that we needed to provide evidence that we were in a committed relationship. I was relieved when he agreed. The letter itself was somewhat disappointing: very brief and the relationship was described in very vague terms. I included the letter, but wondered what an immigration officer would take from it. I understood my brother’s struggle to put in writing something that was in our home country considered extremely private and potentially shaming to my family, but I had hoped he would understand the importance.
In the moments when my vulnerability settled more gently into the back of my mind, I could appreciate that I was a very positive case. I had sent in a textbook perfect independent application, and had made a strong case for the H&C appeal.

*I am a very very positive case*

*I'm a very green light*

*I'm as perfect a case as the officers would like to have*

*I think*

*I mean like I sent in the perfect independent package...on its own and then sent this in and said basically change to H&C because I have a partner here*

*I mean to me isn't that more perfect not only has she already got a life here money, at the time, and job and working experience and education here BUT SHE'S GOT A LIFE HERE WITH A PARTNER Isn't that wonderful You would THINK*

**SCENE**: If I was talking to an officer right now.

**SETTING**: applicant and immigration officer sit face-to-face. Just talking over coffee.

Leslie as Applicant: 

**LOOK** regardless of whether or not you give me the piece of paper now, it's not going to change my life like tomorrow. The only real way that I'll notice the difference is my social security number will change, and I'll be able to get a job, and not have to stretch my dollar so much. But it's not going to change in the
sense that NOW it gives me permission to look for friends. It’s not going to give me permission to eat in a place I didn't eat before, or any of those things.

I HAVE A LIFE HERE.

I'm living here

My reality is I don't have stability

The technical reality is that I don't have stability

I don't have the papers

But my LIVED reality is that I LIVE here

and that I WORK here

and I STUDY here

and that I have friends here

and I have community here

Waiting for Status

The waiting stretched out well beyond the time frames I had been given. Still no word came from the consulate. A full year after submitting the appeal for H&C consideration I learned that my application was one of thousands caught between policies. The consulate had been unable to review my application, filed under the old system, in the six-month transition time they had been set before starting to process applications under the new system. Although family class and new skilled worker applications were being prioritized for processing, old independent applications were left
in limbo. No one was able to give me clear answers about when or even if my application would be processed. My faxes were not answered. My phone calls to CIC ended in dead ends or the run around. At one point I was told I might have to re-file under the new process.

Waiting and uncertainty stirred up my fears of rejection. I had come to Canada with an idealized view of it as a First World country, seeing it as more progressive and more intellectual than my home country. This belief turned the application process into an evaluation of my character: My ability to adapt, to be productive, my potential to be a good citizen were all up for judgement. The long wait, the possibility of rejection, the complete lack of response from the consulate intensified my feelings of unworthiness.

You are constantly told by the Canadian Immigration process that you aren’t worthy. I have always had to struggle to feel my own self-worth. I know the harsh discipline and isolation I experienced in my family laid the foundation for doubts about my own worthiness. In my home country I was not validated as a young lesbian or queer woman. In Canada my experiences of racism, housing discrimination, and low-paying jobs as well as the application process itself challenged my sense of worth and value.

I remember my anxiety about the application shifting, although I am not certain why the shift occurred, but I remember thinking to myself

If this country does not want me
It's their loss

And the day I could say that
I realized I had transcended a whole bunch of baggage
that I had brought with me
The whole idea that I wasn’t worthy
That there was something wrong with me
This statement may have initially been preparation for possible rejection, but it became a statement of empowerment, bringing greater strength and conviction each time I thought about my application. Details of the application process sifted into place.

*Immigration application asks you about technical stuff*
*It doesn’t ask you*
*How many friends have you made?*
*How many lives have you touched?*

*There is no way that*
*that process can tell you*
*How a person lives their life*
*Or what kind of potential they have*

The uncertainty of my application rested more gently.

*Acceptance*

I waited for Bo to come home before I opened the envelope. The first line told me it was the letter she had been waiting almost two years to read. That weekend Bo and I borrowed a car, took the letter from immigration, and made a late night drive to the border and back to make it official. The summer weekend, with a barbeque and dance and brunches, was a great chance to celebrate. On Monday, with the familiarity of an ordinary breakfast, I settled into the comfortable knowledge that nothing had to change, I could continue living the life I had already created here.

Sharing my good news with friends brought new perspectives and some surprises. I logged onto a list serve for Queer Asian Women. I was surprised when I noticed a familiar name among the women currently on the list.

>
Hey Michelle!! It's been ages. How are you doing? Where are you now?

Hi Leslie! Too long!! Good to hear from you— I'm back home and you would not believe the changes that are going on here...it's like queer pride has finally come home...

Over several e-mails and phone calls back and forth Michelle updated me on the changes in government policy towards gay, lesbian and transgendered people that were under way in my home country. Several prominent people coming out had prompted others to be more open. Michelle was seeing shifts in both visibility and acceptance of queers. Hearing the skepticism in my voice, Michelle told me I would have to come see for myself. Perhaps I will.

When I called some friends in the UK, we got into a conversation about how impressed they were that Canadian immigration recognized same-sex partnerships, while they were still struggling for basic rights as common-law couples. I felt some of my anger shift. Yes, it was a discriminatory process. Yes, it was racist, and sexist, and heterosexist. But the process existed. Ordinary citizens had pushed for it to exist, and would continue to push. I might join them in this work.

Securely in Canada now, I have a sense of possibility in the life and community I have created for myself with Bo here. From this solid place, I can imagine going back home to reconnect with family and friends. My home country is no longer so threatening, in part because of the changes there, and in part, because I am more confident that I can be my own source of validation and acceptance. I could enjoy returning to live and work there for a time, can see
myself contributing to pushing the edges of tolerance of queers a little further
towards real acceptance.

What I would really like, and can now imagine doing, is returning home for an
extended visit. One evening Bo and I would dress up and go to a nice restaurant. We
would join my brother, Jay, his wife, Chu, her brother, Mathew, and his wife, Jenn. We
all sit around a table in a bustling dining room and my family enjoys having a meal
together.

**Researcher Reflections**

Leslie begins her story “I was struggling” and repeatedly names her struggles in
her self-narrative. I noticed ways that her struggle is enacted in her narrative process.
Conflicting discourses around sexualitites are raised, drawn on and challenged through
the dialogues and scenes she constructs with significant others. The tension between
ownership and disavowal of sexual self is carried out in these dialogues.

Leslie commented that eight, even five years ago, the life she has now would have
been unimaginable to her. She moves in her story from being unable to imagine a future
self living a life based on her attraction to women, to being able to imagine such a future.
It is in Canada that this imagined self becomes possible. The self that could not imagine a
future with women is still present in Leslie’s story. Leslie contemplates who she would
have been if she had not left her home country through dialogues and hypothetical
scenarios with this past self. She also brings the awareness of this past self into
hypothetical scenarios exploring “What if I had to go back.” Her anxiety around her
application for permanent residency is saturated with the memories of having no options
for living as a lesbian or queer woman in her home country. She narrates threats of violence, job discrimination, bringing shame to her family, and of living a secret life. Although she is aware, through on-line communities, that networks of Q LGBT people are forming in her country, her most vivid impressions are of a bleak future of constant monitoring. In our third meeting, Leslie narrated her story of getting the acceptance letter and of learning about the changes in her home country. Through narrating these experiences she has been able to create an imaginable future self back in her home country.

Leslie’s construction of her place in the tomboy culture of her school serves several discursive purposes. Constructing her sexual self from childhood enhances continuity and coherence of self. The tomboy culture in Leslie’s school provided her with a set of practices that allowed a self-presentation that facilitated same-sex relationships, without requiring direct verbal acknowledgement of the intimate and sexual nature of the relationships. In the context of the research interview, Leslie’s narration of the tomboy culture worked to construct a view of her home culture that in some ways challenges stereotypes of her country as monolithically patriarchal. When we discussed the tomboy culture in the interpretation session Leslie commented on the importance of including this part of her experience in her story. She described being frequently positioned, particularly by White western feminists, to give testimony to patriarchy of her country. I noticed a shift in my working rapport with Leslie when we explicitly addressed her concerns about stereotyping her home country. I also shared some of my mix of reactions to the tom/dee culture I had interacted with in Thailand. I understand this shift as Leslie’s struggle at work in our relationship. Once I was able to convey understanding
Coming (out) to Canada 149

and acceptance of the complexity of her perspective of her home culture her struggle to assert this position into our relationship diminished. A second shift occurred between interview 2 and 3 when as part of her school assignment she interviewed me about my understandings of identities, including my whiteness.

Leslie’s presentation of sexual self in her relationships is a complex negotiation of different cultural discourses around sexuality, self, and sexual orientation. Leslie’s e-mail with her brother and her interactions with her Grandmother are examples of interactions where her relationship with Bo is indirectly acknowledged by family or friends. With her family and some others Leslie prefers to speak in abstract or indirect ways about her relationship or sexuality. I see these interactions as examples of her creative negotiation with different cultural practices around presentation of self. Although those of us steeped in expectations of coming out in the West may see ways that she is hiding in these interactions, I also see ways that she is using existing cultural discourses to bring her QLGB sexual self into the interaction in a culturally intelligible manner. I interpret these as examples of coming into, and asked Leslie about these interactions. With her grandmother, she checks the intelligibility of same-sex attraction. She indirectly seeks acknowledgment of her relationship with Bo in a manner that does not require direct self-statements that might be construed as overly proud or rebellious while talking to an elder. Her grandmother offers a form of indirect acknowledgement, by asking about Bo and treating her in a Grandmotherly way. In her narrative, Leslie relays how she initially used the third person to speak about her relationship to her friend. Leslie commented on the transition in our interpretive session, noting that using the third person to refer to yourself is not uncommon in her first language. I was able to recognize how this
difference might function, because dropping personal pronouns altogether or using a name or position like a first/third person pronoun is a common practice in Thai. Using the third person allows Leslie to test the safety of disclosing her relationship, while also creating a detached perspective as she speaks. It also avoids the sometimes too direct use of autonomous I statements. Abstract language, questions, and the use of the third person, along with attention to non-verbals were all coming into strategies Leslie used to gain support or acknowledgement around her same-sex relationship.

Leslie enacts her struggle to bring her QLGB sexuality into her interactions with others in her narrative process. In many loss of the relationship is at stake. There is movement in her narrative: as she gains relationships where her queer sexual self is validated, potential risk of loss of other relationships are less threatening. Some relationship rejections remain too risky to challenge at this time: her relationship with the church, perhaps with God, and her relationship with parents. She has distanced herself in these relationships, “removing herself from places she has to hide”, rather than risk rejection.

Leslie’s use of queer changed over the course of the interview. She used queer first to refer to others, then to a collective that includes her, then through the eyes of others “they knew that I…was queer.” Later in her story she makes an autonomous claim to queer embedded within a discussion of how she does not fit stereotypes. I interpret this movement as a reflection of two processes at work. Leslie’s comfort with claiming queer with me grew as she told her story to me. In our interpretation session she commented that she had noticed the number of times she comfortably used lesbian or queer in the interview. The evidence of
this growing comfort in the transcript was reassuring to her. I also interpret the
movement as part of her process of negotiating and revising the construct queer
to be one that she can claim. Her positioning with queer remains an uneasy one.
Her statement simultaneously invokes, questions, and challenges negative
discourses of queers. She connects herself with queer while negotiating the
meaning of the construct for her. Discursively she produces her struggle to defy
social expectations in order to claim the identity and assert her right to embody it
in a manner that is compatible with her religious, familial, and cultural selves.
Using the word *baggage*, she is simultaneously problematizing some of the
values her that her religious, familial and cultural selves carry.

Leslie’s narrative gives a rich sense of the intense and extreme shifts in meaning
the immigration process can take. I believe these came through in her story to a greater
degree than the other women’s stories because the interviews coincided with, rather than
followed, her experience of the process. Leslie had submitted her application over a year
before our interview and her status remained uncertain for our first two meetings. Also,
given the criminalized status of homosexuality in her home country the stakes were
particularly high. Leslie produces her struggle with immigration’s authority in her
narrative. Her conflicting constructions of the process are narrated in dialogues with
hypothetical officers where she is confronted by and confronts the discrimination in the
process. Through these dialogues, she constructs her application as text-book perfect in
every detail. She then reframes the process, making it no longer an assessment of her
worthiness. This reframing occurred in the third meeting, after Leslie had permanent
resident status.
Leslie’s narrative provides a glimpse of the some of the challenges she has encountered as a QLGB woman of colour, and the complex set of discourses she is navigating in her settlement process. In her narration of the housing discrimination she and Bo experience, she articulates the permutations of oppressions at work. She describes a sense of recognition and validation of her QLGB self in her description of going to queer clubs, while qualifying ways that the spaces do not provide her with the sense of connection she wants.

When I first listened to Leslie’s story I was struck by the movement from feeling profoundly alienated and alone in her differences, to a sense of acceptance and belonging in which her differences became a source of connection with others. When I commented on this in our interpretation session, Leslie remarked that she now feels confident that part of what people appreciate about her is her critical perspective. In our third meeting, she and I traced the change in her own worldview that has occurred with her immigration experience. She described it as a shedding of her own colonialized perspective of the world. She had left her home country angry at the injustice there, hoping to escape to a country she idealized as more progressive. She grew increasingly aware of the clash between the ideal Canada she had expected, and the reality of discrimination she experienced in Canada—as a queer woman, as a woman of colour, as low-income student, as a woman immigrating from an Asian country. She was angry at this discrepancy before she started the process. While her future was held in the hands of an anonymous immigration official, powerlessness fueled her anger into bitterness. Coming through the immigration process, learning more about the situation in other countries, including her own, has helped her put the injustices she has experienced and the
privileges she knows she has into a more nuanced perspective, one that recognizes her own role in acting to promote social change.
Chapter 5

PATTERNS, CONTOURS, AND CONTRASTS:

CROSS NARRATIVE- INTERPRETATION, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSION

I asked women to tell me their stories of immigrating to Canada using an unofficial, hidden process for same-sex partners of QLGB Canadians. In these women's stories, I heard narratives of struggle and resistance, of on-going transformation, of desire and love, of courage and survival, and of achievement and success. These women have forged life-paths that stretch conventions, challenge oppressions, and stretch possibilities: by daring to love women in the face of homophobia; by engaging with a bureaucratic process with practices that reinforce oppressions of heterosexism, sexism, classism, racism and neo-colonialism, and by working to build lives in Canada. While telling the stories of their intimate relationships with women, their application process, and their relocation and settlement process, women constructed QLGB sexual selves that incorporated the meanings they have made of these experiences. In narrating their intimate relationships with women, these women navigated homophobia and sexism in the form of silence, partial, and problematic discourses around women’s sexualities and QLGB sexualities. In their application process, women made meaning of the ways that oppressions both enabled and constrained their options, and incorporated these meanings into their constructions of self. Finally, their relocation and settlement in Canada gives them an awareness of living as a QLGB woman in two different cultural contexts, and of their shifts in social position, as immigrating women. I sought to understand how women constructed self in their narratives, given these major shifts and disruptions in their lives,
and the myriad of changing relationships and communities, and therefore discursive
terrain they were navigating.

In this chapter, I draw interpretations across narratives, highlighting patterns,
contrasts, and contours in the women's narrative process, their constructions of meaning
around relationships and power, and their constructions of QLGB sexual self. I structure
this discussion into parts 1) Contexts of homophobia and heterosexism: Constructing
QLGB sexual self in resistance 2) Love, desire, and silence: constructing QLGB sexual
self in same-sex relationships 3) Engaging with Authority: constructions of power and
QLGB self in the application process 4) Creating lives, communities and self in Canada.
I then discuss implications of this study for counselling psychology research and practice,
for research on immigration and sexualities, and for support services. Then I discuss
criteria of rigor and validity, and how I achieved these. Finally, I reflect on strengths and
limitations of my work.

Contexts of homophobia and heterosexism: Constructing QLGB sexual self in resistance

As women told their immigration stories, they told me their stories of living in
defiance of practices of homophobia and heterosexism in their own cultures and in
Canada. The events and language women used to tell their stories convey their
engagement with these oppressions.

Judgments and threats stemming from homophobic discourses acted as forces of
constraint in each of the women's narratives. Both Leslie and Suzanne recalled
condemnation based in religious or pathologizing discourses on women's and QLGB
sexualities in their narratives. In several places they took up the voices of remembered or
hypothetical others both invoking and resisting these discourses. Threats of homophobic
violence were narrated by both Leslie and Gwen. Gwen describes threats of violence against her as a woman, and later as a lesbian, as a constraint on her movement and safety. Gwen arms herself literally, and through her appearance and movements to survive as a lesbian and woman in her home country. Moving to a community in Canada where she feels safer, gives Gwen more flexibility in how she embodies and enacts her QLGB sexual self. Leslie carries fears of legal persecution, violence, and job discrimination in her home country and narrates her experiences of housing discrimination in Canada. In a hypothetical scene in a restaurant, Leslie vividly narrates the fears of physical threats that she carries with her. Her dream of having dinner with her partner and her family at the end of her story provides an example of the everyday courage involved in seemingly simple acts.

Harder for the women to articulate, were the impacts of erasure. I heard erasure as silence and tension of in our interview process. I heard women straining against silence and the limitations of language in their efforts to narrate their lives. Silence restricted their ability to understand their experiences and to articulate their experience to those in their narratives as well as to me. Small cracks in the silence provided narrow, incomplete, enigmatic, or pathological discourses around women’s sexualities and same-sex desire.

All of the women alluded to ways that silence around women’s sexuality and same-sex desire were forces of erasure and constraint in their lives. They spoke of the lack of role models, lack of language, and their inability to connect their experience to possibilities. Silence limited the concepts women had for understanding themselves, reinforced heteronormative life-paths, and rendered alternative life-paths invisible. The
women's efforts to construct a QLGB sexual self in the present, and a possible future QLGB self in the face of silence and erasure formed important plot elements in each of the narratives.

Women drew creatively on discourses available in their home countries to construct a self that enhanced coherence of self and continuity of sexual self in their narratives. Gwen produced herself as a non-conforming, feminist, protector for her girlfriends. Leslie narrated herself as someone who participated in the tomboy culture available in her school as a means of accessing some of the male privilege that her brothers enjoyed. Suzanne narratively accounted for her lack of connection with feminist and lesbian communities in her home country in order to make sense of the discontinuity with her current construction of QLGB sexual self.

Resistance to conventional heterosexual life-scripts and a desire to push beyond the limited roles for women that these life-scripts provide was a theme in all of the women's stories. In their narratives women described ways that they felt constrained by rigid gender codes. Each conveyed dissatisfaction or outright rejection of an anticipated future in a traditional marriage. Each of the women also narrated difficulties imagining a future self other than the heterosexual life-scripts presented to them. For example, Leslie imagined being alone for a very long time as a future self. Gwen described a period of confusion when she had rejected traditional marriage but other options remained elusive. In joint interpretation sessions women reflected on their interaction with silence, erasure, pathologization of QLGB sexualities, in their stories making their sometimes tacit knowledge of their engagement with these discourses explicit. As problematic as the available discourses were, women drew on them as evidence that they were not alone in
experiencing attraction for women and as sources of questions or possibilities. This created a tension in each of the women’s stories as they simultaneously drew on and distanced themselves from available constructs of women’s sexualities and same-sex desire. Leslie explicitly names her struggle and displays the struggle through remembered and hypothetical conversations in which she takes up conflicting voices. In Gwen’s narrative, a journey of exploration provides a means, literally and metaphorically, for her to leave a context she found stilling and explore an expanding range of possibilities. The journey provides Gwen with a flexible metaphor for her confusion and

*Love, desire, and silence: Constructing QLGB sexual self in same-sex relationships*

As part of narrating their immigration experience, women told me the stories of their intimate relationships with women. The women’s interpretive accounts of their intimate and sexual relationships with women provide focused examples of women’s navigation of the conflicting, incomplete and problematic discourses around women’s sexualities and QLGB sexualities. Hate and homophobia have made claiming and speaking of desire physically dangerous, psychologically stigmatizing or shaming. Heterosexism erases and silences the possibility of women’s same-sex desire, limiting and saturating the language women have available to speak of their desire. These forces were present in the interaction of the interview in the language and silence women used. I heard a tension as women talked about and around, or avoided altogether, their sexual desire for women. I interpreted the tension as a struggle between ownership and disavowal or distancing from QLGB sexual self at work in the narratives.
In places, women narrated how homophobia created silence and a tension between ownership and disavowal of QLGB sexual self in their relationships. Leslie’s description of her tomboy culture in school showed how silence created a protective, but isolating, veil for her relationships with her girlfriend. The tomboy culture facilitated intimate relationships between girls, but effectively denied their sexual nature. In her adult years, Leslie’s statement that “without talking about what it meant,” she and Bo “Somehow we knew were going to be together,” is also an example of silence at work in the relationship. In our joint interpretation session Leslie commented on ways that erasure limited her knowledge of “how to date” women. Gwen also narrates her initial relationship with Beth as developing without talking about it. In these examples homophobia kept women from speaking, even to each other, about their same-sex desire and relationships.

Women’s language held the tension between ownership, sometimes clear sometimes qualified, and disavowal of same-sex desire, intimacy, and their QLGB sexual self. Suzanne spoke easily in a matter of fact manner about her desire and her sexual relationships with women, and relayed an event where she willed herself to put her attraction to women “on hold.” In places, some of the women used tentative language or indirect references to speak about sex or sexual desire. Leslie was very cautious, referring only to her partner becoming more “physical.” In describing their desire and sexual relationships two of the women, Gwen and Leslie, to varying degrees, disavow their sexual self by linguistically creating naiveté, passivity, or detached observer perspectives. Gwen’s comment “I noticed I was behaving as if I was flirting with her.” is an example of this. At other times women maintained ambiguity in their ownership of their desire.
For example, Gwen conveyed clear recognition of her choice to pursue a sexual relationship with Beth in her “coin-in-the-hand” moment, and then put the choice to fate. The tension between ownership and disavowal is at work in Leslie’s comment “somehow we knew we were going to be together.” She is owning knowledge of the intimate relationship, while maintaining ambiguity of an indirect acknowledgement with “Somehow.”

Two of the women moved into metaphorical language to narrate their first sexual relationships with women.” I interpreted these as places where women were stretching language to convey an embodied experience, while working against the silence that exists around same-sex desire. They were trying to say more, without saying too much. Their metaphors constructed their sexual experiences as providing a sense of confirmation and integration. Suzanne spoke of “all the pieces of a puzzle coming together,” “becoming clear,” and “coming home.” Gwen described a sense of “mind, body and spirit coming together.” I heard genres of romance and coming out stories in these descriptions. Suzanne commented ironically on these genres in her own story, a comment I would have liked to have asked more about, had we had a second interpretation session. In emphasizing the women’s use of these meta-narratives, I am not suggesting that the women have been duped, nor that they are merely collages of available discourses. They, like all of us, are engaging in a creative struggle with available concepts to make meaning of their lives. Their use of language that reflects coming out or romance stories reflects their negotiation of meta-narratives present in our culture.

*Engaging authority: Constructions of power and QLGB self in the application process*
In accessing and using a hidden immigration process for same-sex partners, women are engaging with an institution that has the power to facilitate or restrict their ability to live with their partners in Canada. The matrix of enabling and constraining elements of this process create the potential for multiple interpretations and constructions of this power and of engagement with this power. Their engagement with this power serves as a potential catalyst for revision of women's QLGB sexual self as women make meaning of the impact of oppressions in their lives.

The narratives create a culturally and historically contextualized view of the women's engagement with authority. These narratives offer insight into the events, relationships, and elements of social context that women remember as significant to their process. Juxtaposing the stories of women from very different home countries and social locations allows insight into the interaction of social location and subjectivity. The women are of different ages, countries of origin, rural/urban backgrounds, and social classes. Leslie is from an Asian industrializing country with a history of being colonized. Gwen and Suzanne are from industrialized European countries. Differences in financial resources and in legal access to Canada clearly impacted the options available to the women. Although this was not the focus of my inquiry, it is important to note that the H&C process for same-sex partners changed in the 10-year period that it has been used. It became more available, regularized, less personal and more bureaucratic. I note how these changes impacted women's experiences of the process as I discuss the ways that women narrated their application process.

*Accessing an in/visible process.* Partners who used the process in the early nineties faced challenges of finding information about the process. Gwen reinforced
themes of resistance and achievement in her narrative when she told the story of tracking down a lawyer mentioned in an article in the local queer press. With some media attention, the growth of the internet, and a widening network of successful applicants, multiple sources of information became available. For Suzanne, who was thoroughly embedded in a local lesbian community when she started the process in 1997, access to information about the H&C process was included as a minor, unremarkable fact in her story. Participants spoke of their initial phone contact with LEGIT as a source of understanding, connection, and relief. For Leslie, the next step of going to a meeting was frightening, both because it required public acknowledgment of her sexuality, and because of her temporary resident status in Canada. When she told of her first meeting she created a self-narrative of courage, rewarded by a sense of belonging. Once accessed, LEGIT became an important source of peer support, information, and advocacy for all of the women during the application process.

**Deciding to use the H&C process.** When women narrated their decision to proceed with an H&C application they built themes of risk and resistance into their self-narratives. Two of the women interviewed for this study emphasized that the process would require them to disclose their sexual orientation to the government and to others and acknowledged that there was risk in this disclosure. The social location and history of the women shaped their framing of risk and resistance. For Leslie, who is from a country with legal prohibition against homosexuality, or as she put it, “where being me can get you thrown in jail”, the risk was most salient and terrifying. For Gwen, who has a family and cultural history that celebrates resistance to political oppression, it was the opportunity for resistance that was most salient and even appealing. She enacted a
conversation with her partner. "Here was an opportunity to be open. We decided together: let's see how it is being done, let's be out, tell them who we are, and what we want." There was both ambivalence and defiance in the face of marginalization, in her description of using a "hidden" process that she described as coming through "the backdoor", and then contextualized "It was as proud as we could be in those days."

Preparing the application package. Applicants using the same-sex H&C appeal process had to provide all the documentation that independent applicants provide including educational qualifications, evidence of language proficiency, and work history. Women's stories of the challenge of compiling their documents contributed to themes of struggle, achievement and belonging. All of the women emphasized the immense time and effort required to complete the application. They all struggled with fears that their application would not measure up as they created the application. Gwen emphasized that she and her partner created her application in a near void of guidelines, as there were no examples of success at the time, heightening the theme of defying erasure in her story. For Suzanne, the sheer volume and detail contributed to a fear that they would overlook something. She also raised a fear that "things could change." Both of these women struggled to make their case to an authority that they understood to be demanding and unpredictable. For Leslie, the fear of not measuring up became a significant conflict feeding into her on-going struggle with feelings of unworthiness. She drew connections among the isolation she experienced as a child, the impact of pathological discourses around homosexuality that she grew up with, the Eurocentricity of the criteria, and her struggles to stay in the country. Leslie creates narrative resolution to this struggle by reconstructing the criteria, not as a measurement of her worth and potential, but instead as
meaningless technical details, and by constructing her self in Canada as someone who belongs, contributes, and is inherently worthy.

Proof of relationship. In their narratives women shared their reactions to the requirement to document the relationship. Suzanne constructed the requirement as unproblematic, emphasizing that she understood the need to document the relationship. She joked that there was nothing outrageous about her life and that anyone reading about her life would probably be bored. In contrast, Leslie was frightened, angry and resentful of the extensive documentation required. The requirement spoke to her of the Canadian government’s obliviousness to the extreme persecution faced by queers in many countries including her own. Gwen’s narrative conveyed her uneasiness at the necessity of having to use a discriminatory process, problematizing the unequal treatment of straight and QLGB relationships in immigration law, and emphasizing the need for on-going resistance.

Support letters. The requirement that applicants provide letters of support to corroborate the evidence of their relationship puts women into heightened conflict with discourses of silence and practices of erasure around queer sexuality and women’s sexuality as they exist in their families and communities. Accounts of interactions around the letters were sites of tension for all of the women. Women made direct disclosures to friends, family members, and employers they might not have otherwise chosen to make. Friends and family members in turn made formal, written disclosure of the relationship to the government.

In telling her story, Leslie discursively constructed indirect and non-verbal means of gaining acknowledgement of her same-sex relationship. In our joint interpretation we
discussed how these interactions, in part, reflect silence around sex in general, and QLGB and women's sexualities in particular. We also discussed how this approach is more compatible with her culture's values around communication of self and of ways to convey respect in a relationship. Borrowing a term from research with Asian American Queer youth (Chan, 1997), I have interpreted these means as ways of coming into. Leslie creatively uses means of coming into to gain acknowledgement of her partnership in interactions with friends and family; however, for her application she needed to ask for a direct, written statement. The negotiation of these different means of communication to ask for letters was a struggle for Leslie. As much as possible, she relied on other means of documenting their relationship.

In telling their immigration stories, women emphasized the validation and acceptance they gained from letters of support and worked to contextualize letters that failed to validate their relationship. Gwen, who had come out to her parents several years earlier, was deeply moved by her parents' letter because of the support it conveyed. They had lived during her country's past persecution and genocide of lesbian and gay men. Describing the courage it took for them to create an official document stating that she is a lesbian, given this history, coheres resistance as a core value she shares with her family. In contrast, the vague letter her brother wrote disappointed Leslie. She contextualizes his difficulties, understanding them as part of the same struggle she was having with navigating the requirement to officially disclose an illegal and stigmatized sexual orientation.

Criteria. The H&C immigration process requires same-sex couples to present their relationship to Immigration Canada for evaluation based on criteria derived from
heterosexual marriage: joint finances, cohabitation, and exclusivity. LEGIT has worked to educate CIC about ways that these criteria would be inappropriate for cross-border QLGB relationships. As a result cohabitation was removed, and the criteria broadened to recognize financial interdependence. Although in other parts of their narrative all of the women problematized or questioned the relevance of heteronormative standards to their relationships, only Suzanne problematized the application criteria. For her, she raised the concern that she would not have been willing to use the process had a legal financial obligation on her partner been created. Expectations of exclusivity were not challenged in the women’s stories, although one of the women had discussed being in a non-monogamous relationship with her partner. From her perspective, it was a non-monogamy of convenience, until both women could be in the same country. It may be that the criteria may not have been a contentious issue for these women. The fact that women did not voice criticism of the criteria may also reflect what was at stake. At the point when the future of their relationships and their ability to live in Canada were at risk, women did not feel able to critique the heterosexism of the criteria. Uncritical acceptance of the criteria in their stories may also reflect our interview context; I was engaging women in a dialogue about how they successfully immigrated to Canada, and we were constructing immigration as an accomplishment. I discussed my interest in how power was at work in the immigration process, but did not specifically identify the criteria as an example of power.

*Waiting for processing.* The H&C process became more regularized and widely available over the ten years that it was available. These changes impacted the women’s experiences of waiting for processing. In the first few years that the H&C process was
available there were no guidelines and few, if any, examples of success. Gwen who used
the process in the early nineties raised these sources of uncertainty. Over time, the
experiences of successful couples established procedures for applicants that LEGIT
communicated through guidebooks, drop-ins, phone-calls and emails. Procedures were
clarified for immigration officers by CIC through memos. These clarified procedures
provided greater certainty of success for later applicants. When Suzanne applied in 1997
the process was fairly well established and Suzanne knew several examples of successful
couples. However, as the process became more regularized and widely available,
processing times appear to have increased, prolonging the period of uncertainty.
Applicants, like Leslie, who were in process during the transition to the new immigration
policy pushed through in the wake of 9-11 faced long delays, more stringent screening,
frightening stories, rumoured and real, about arbitrary rejections, and conflicting
information about how the transition would be handled.

It was once the application was complete and submitted that women struggled
most with having decision-making power over their lives rest in hands of an anonymous
immigration official. Suzanne described her struggle to stay with the uncertain impact of
this power as agonizing and horrible. She had constructed independence as an integral
value that guided her life-path and provided cohesion for her career self and lesbian self.
She emphasized ways that the process threatened this value; creating dependence on her
partner and on the immigration official. In content and narrative process she worked to
minimize her dependence. Leslie and Gwen enacted their struggle with immigration’s
power over their lives through constructed hypothetical dialogues with immigration
officials. Leslie’s did this several times during her narrative process: in her first
construction of the immigration officer she parodied a self-congratulatory officer benignly allowing her to apply as a special case. In another she angrily confronts an officer with the strengths of her application. In the last, she creates a face-to-face conversation she would like to have had with an officer, where she tells the officer that their judgment is irrelevant because she has already created a life for herself in Canada. Gwen interacts with the officer in her story, first through reading out parts of the letter she wrote, taking on a tone that is respectful, official, and persuasive. She appeals to notions of true love and ensures the officer of her ability to adapt to Canada. During the narration of her waiting period however, she rails against an invoked officer for daring to keep her apart from her partner and trying to control her life.

Women drew on and worked against common Canadian immigration discourses to construct their case in their narratives of their letters and hypothetical interactions with officers. Leslie took great pains to make a case that she would not be a burden to the system, taking up and then working against a frequently invoked immigration discourse that troubles immigrant women of colour in particular (Ng, 1993). The two European women raise and dismiss the discourse with less effort. Gwen emphasizes her ability to adapt to life in Canada when she reads her letter to the immigration official. Suzanne acknowledges that her financial independence made it much easier to stay in Canada.

Crossing borders. In their stories of crossing borders and applying for Visas women made meanings of their relative positions of powerlessness and privilege. Each of the women narrated fears, anxiety, and a sense of instability when they relied on temporary visas to enter and stay in Canada. In the course of her application Suzanne needed to make several crossings. "We have a passport that is welcome at borders. I did
not understand what that meant then.” She vividly described feeling “numb...free-floating powerlessness” when, for the first time in her life, she faced the possibility of being turned away at the Canadian border, unable to return to her home. Although the possibility horrified her, she quickly moved on to contrast her situation with others for whom returning to a home country would be dangerous or difficult. Throughout her story, Suzanne makes sense of the options and restrictions she negotiates as a woman with financial resources, but from a working class background, and as a European woman, and lesbian. She constructs her life as a series of trade offs in rights and options, and her self as someone who has struggled to expand the bounds of the possible through her decisions to cross literal and figurative borders of class and gender oppression. She creates a personal metaphor of self as border crosser; as a border crosser her perception is sharpened gaining multiple perspectives on her life and her environment.

The interview. The interview was a much-anticipated event in the women’s immigration stories. In the early days of the process all same-sex couple applicants were interviewed, usually with the partner. Cora and Gwen were interviewed with their partners. Four years later, Suzanne was interviewed alone. As the process became more regularized, fewer applicants were interviewed. Leslie emphasized that she took every measure possible to make her application package thorough enough to avoid an interview and felt a sense of accomplishment when she received status without an interview.

The women who were interviewed described their trips to consulates for interviews with detail and attention to the emotions of both themselves and their partners. Their voices took on tones of relief, surprise, and persuasion as they told me that their interviews were good experiences, far better than they expected. When I asked about
their relief, most had anticipated being grilled about details to test whether they were lying, being subjected to overly personal questions, or outright discrimination. Instead, Suzanne and Gwen were impressed by the professionalism and respect with which the immigration officers handled the interview. Gwen felt immense relief and respect when the immigration official returned the application package, clearly addressing her unexpressed fears of exposure. These interview narratives, in the details withheld unless asked, convey the fear and expectation of discrimination that these women silently carried with them into their interactions with authority.

As the H&C process became more regularized and widespread, it also became less personal. Leslie did not know the name of the officer who processed her application and had no interview. By 2001, fax and phone systems of CIC prevented applicants from making contact with actual decision makers. In her narrative, Leslie raised the existence of her application package in the files of an anonymous bureaucracy as an unpredictable source of fear and potential problems in the future. The anonymity of this decision-making power heightened her anxiety. I interpreted her use of hypothetical conversations with an imaginary officer as ways of voicing and countering her fears.

In telling the narrative of their engagement with immigration the women constructed self-narratives of resistance, courage in the face of risk, and achievement around their QLGB self. Gwen is energized by the opportunity for resistance from the outset, and holds onto this engagement as a personal success despite the break up of her relationship. Seeing opportunities for resistance is a theme that contributes unity to Gwen’s self-narrative and a valued part of her QLGB self. Suzanne constructs her immigration process as a series of trade-offs, making meaning of the ways she has
navigated different sources of privilege and oppression in her life-choices. Leslie struggles with rejection, unworthiness and anger at injustice throughout her immigration. Her eventual success reinforces a view of herself as someone capable of working towards positive social change.

Creating lives, communities, and self in Canada

In their immigration narratives women reflect on their experiences of relocating and settling in Canada. They discuss the challenges they faced in building a life in Canada, and their navigation of different relationships and communities in Canada. As they did so they constructed a QLGB sexual self that incorporated their engagement with these processes.

Settlement challenges. For all of the women, creating a life in Canada was a greater challenge than the application process. In my investigation, the women narrated settlement challenges common to other immigrating women: finding employment and establishing careers, finding housing, and establishing new social networks. They also narrated ways that their position as QLGB women and for Leslie, a woman of colour, contributed to these challenges. I discuss building career and community, as these were two areas that were prominent in women’s narratives and that were incorporated into women’s constructions of their QLGB sexual self.

Career. Creating financially viable and meaningful work was a major challenge for the women. All of the women emphasized their need to be able to financially support themselves independently without the support of extended family in Canada. All of the women situated their difficulties finding work in the larger context of hiring policies that discriminate against immigrants by failing to recognize international qualifications and
experience, or visa restrictions placed on international students. Gwen joked about doing the “typical” immigrant thing of volunteering to gain experience. Suzanne and Leslie noted the contradictions Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism and actual hiring practices.

The struggle to create work was most prominent in Suzanne’s story, perhaps because she is the only participant who had begun to establish a career in her home country prior to coming to Canada. For her the decline of status, recognition, and financial security were deeply felt losses. She works to make meaning and bring some resolution to this loss in her narrative. Her efforts create an interplay of multiple and seemingly contradictory stances around her status as an immigrant, and immigration and employment practices: At times she is angry at the double standard in employment practices, at other times she expresses understanding of discriminatory hiring practices, and in other places compares her progress to locals in a manner that minimizes the impact of discrimination. She frames this struggle as her lifelong challenge, and a necessary trade-off for the greater freedom and rights she enjoys as a lesbian here.

Community. Women narrated their efforts to find and create community and a sense of belonging, acknowledging the time and energy involved in building these relationships. Immediately after the break up, Gwen experienced aspects of the local lesbian community as invasive, knowing too much about her situation, without necessarily being supportive. She experienced her greatest sense of connection initially with a co-national lesbian who had also immigrated. Over time, she has come to value that the greater safety and openness she enjoys in Canada, allows her to have a broader, more diverse network of friends than she believes would have been possible in her home
country. Leslie struggles to feel a sense of belonging. She leaves her church because of the invisibility she experienced there as a queer woman. She narrated enjoying a sense of recognition, but out of place at the predominantly White bars and QLGB community centres. Towards the end of her story she is meeting others with similar values through school and LEGIT, and gains a significant sense of connection through an online community for Queer Asian women.

As they moved in different cultural communities, all of the women described situations in which they negotiated conflicting cultural discourses around direct or indirect and verbal or non-verbal presentation of self and sexual self. These negotiations were present in all of the women’s narratives, but were most prominently displayed in Leslie’s story. By interpreting interactions where women present or construct their QLGB sexual self through indirect, non-verbal means as examples of coming into, I have highlighted women’s creative use of available cultural repertoires. Coming into was accomplished discursively in Leslie’s narrative in her interactions with her brother, grandmother, and some of her friends by emphasizing ways that her relationship received non-verbal acknowledgement or indirect recognition. In her story Leslie also linguistically constructed tension around the ambiguity of coming into. These interactions were typically told as conversations that, drawing on Bakhtin’s conception of polyphonic novel and double voicing (Bell & Gardiner, 1998; Whortham, 1999) I interpreted as sites where multiple meanings were dense and in conflict.

Crossing borders, shifting boundaries and self. Moving to Canada brought women into contexts where different cultural discourses around women’s sexualities and QLGB sexualities were at work. All of the women built or revised their constructions of
lesbian, queer, or gay woman through their intimate relationships with women and contact with other QLGB women. Each of the women developed richer constructions that allowed them to take up these identity positions in their narratives. Polysemia exists in the manner women drew on these identity constructs. At times they were drawing on them in the context of raising and disputing negative stereotypes or narrow discourses around the constructs. I heard both discomfort with and resistance to these discourses. Dialogically they were constructing a relationship with the construct that invoked and resisted negative meanings sedimented within lesbian, gay, or queer. I interpreted women’s positionings around these constructs as part of their renegotiation of their relationships with the constructs. For example, Leslie, over the course of the interview, shifted her positioning around queer: using it first to refer to a collective other, then including herself in the collective. Eventually she uses it to refer to herself, problematizing ways that the construct constrains her and voicing the challenges of assumed others who question her performance of queer as not conforming to their expectations. Gwen revises her construction of lesbian in Canada to be one that she can comfortably claim. Through her movement between lesbian communities in Europe and Canada, Gwen creates a QLGB sexual self around dyke, a term that carries meanings in both of her languages. Suzanne’s does not construct a lesbian self in her home country in Europe in her self-narrative, but creates a sexual self around lesbian that she claims unproblematically in Canada.

The women relayed events during their settlement process where they were navigating the shifts in their social position that have occurred with their migration. At some point in their stories each of the women credited experiencing these shifts and
occupying different positions of privilege and oppression to increased sensitivity, greater perception. All of the women emphasize ways that their experience of being different, as QLGBs, as immigrants, for two as women of colour, gives them both a more sensitive, critical, and nuanced perspective on the world. Their abilities to reflect on, contrast, and contextualize cultural practices and discourses at work in their own lives and stories speak to this heightened awareness. They each narrated ways that their ability to perceive, mediate, or connect across differences becomes a strength and a valued quality for themselves, for their careers, and for their communities. Their narratives also create an active or participatory stance for themselves that acknowledges their struggles with oppressions, and emphasizes their ability to engage with them.

Over the course of her narrative, Leslie reframes her “critical perspective” as an appreciated quality instead of a source of isolation, emphasizing her connections with others working towards social change. This “critical perspective” incorporates the more nuance perspective of the world she has gained through her experience of moving from a colonized view of the world, including her home country and Canada, to one that recognizes multiple interpretations of many sources of oppression and privilege.

Two of the women in the course of telling their narrative constructed and elaborated on personal metaphors that cohered multiple sources of self, and created an active stance for their engagement with multiple social forces: Gwen created the metaphor of dyke as mediator and Suzanne created self as border crosser. In both of their narratives these metaphors serve to enhance coherence among selves: For Gwen, dyke as mediator creates a shared value and purpose among her career, immigrant, and QLGB sexual selves. With each of these selves, she mediates between multiple perspectives.
She acknowledges that it is a difficult place to occupy, but feels a strong sense of purpose in this place. For Suzanne, the metaphor of border crosser emphasizes an enhanced, sensitized perspective she has gained from crossing boundaries of geography, class, gender and sexuality. This enhanced sensitivity, to both beauty and problems in the world serves her well in her career and life. Suzanne uses this enhanced perspective to make sense of the loss in career status that she has encountered. Both metaphors create an active, participatory stance for the women that acknowledge the oppressions they encounter.

Gwen, Suzanne, and Leslie create self-narratives and personal metaphors that incorporate their experiences of engaging a matrix of oppressions and their navigation of myriad shifts in relationships and communities into self. They have made meaning of their intimate relationships, successful immigration to Canada, and their on-going challenge to build lives in Canada, creating self-narratives of struggle, resistance, and achievement. Their narratives provide a view of the meta-narratives and repertoire they use to navigate their shifting discursive terrain, to make sense of the disruptions in their lives and construct QLGB sexual self.

“*Our acts against oppression become integral with self,*

*motivated and empowered from within*” Audre Lorde

Implications

*Implications for Counselling PsychologyResearch and Practice*

I entered into this investigation with an experiential awareness of the challenge of constructing a QLGB sexual self when societies provide limited, narrow, and distorted views of women’s sexualities and of sexualities based on same-sex desire. I heard this
challenge in the women's narratives. This challenge has been explored in QLGB literature as well as work in Queer/Gay and Lesbian studies and the social sciences (for a discussion see Weston, 1998). Within psychology, this challenge has been investigated by some feminist psychologists (Brown, 2000; White, Barrie Bondurant, & Brown Travis, 2000; Wilkerson & Kitzenger, 2003). Counselling psychology research and practice would benefit from further investigation of how women understand and meet this challenge. Towards this effort, I worked with interview texts to understand women's creative navigation of their discursive terrain, providing a view of how these women construct QLGB sexual selves.

The metaphors women use to understand their engagement with conflicting social discourses in their construction of QLGB selves emerged in their stories. The women invoked struggling, journeying, and investigating or questing at different times. Each of these metaphors has potential for further research exploration and counselling applications. What other metaphors or frames do women draw on? What are the implications of each of these metaphors? Would changing frames contribute to a richer understanding of women's construction of their sexual self? Would exploration of these frames facilitate construction of healthy QLGB sexualities? The metaphors that women used in their narratives suggest the need for conceptualizations that acknowledge the contributions of multiple aspects, including the social, as well as the fluidity, and mediated agency that women speak to through their metaphors and narratives. Recent work has drawn on action theory's notion of career as a conceptual model for construction of sexualities (Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Peplau, 2001). This conceptual framework provides an alternative to linear developmental models that is flexible, that
accommodates multiple interacting levels of contributors, and acknowledges agency.

The frames that women used to narrate their construction of sexual self suggest that such a framework is worth further exploration.

While relaying their interactions with immigration, women in this study created self narratives that incorporated both risk and resistance to oppression into their sense of QLGB self. Examples include Gwen’s use of dyke as mediator, Leslie’s eventual understanding that her critical perspective is a valued quality, and Cora’s voice of self-advocacy. Until recently, much of the psychology literature has treated management of oppressions and sexual identity formation as separate processes in isolation. Recent research (McCarn and Fassinger, 1996; Pelplau & Garnet, 2001) has recognized the necessity of understanding identity formation, or women’s construction of sexual self, in the context of oppressions and theorizing connections among these processes. This study provided a view of some of the ways that women may incorporate their engagement with heterosexism and other oppressions into their sense of QLGB self. These connections warrant additional research.

Constructivist theories of self and therapeutic approaches emphasize the importance of personal metaphors to the narrative self construction process (Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1991). Gwen and Suzanne’s construction of personal metaphors of dyke and border crosser respectively are noteworthy examples of such personal metaphors at work. I highlight the metaphors that women construct around their multiple subject positions in their narratives as an area for further research for with both theoretical and counselling implications.
Coming out/coming into. Psychology researchers have treated verbal disclosure of an independent sexual identity as a sign of mature integrated QGLB sexualities (Cass, 1979; Troiden). Multicultural studies of sexuality have called this emphasis into question (Gock, 1996; Tofoya, 1996; Nakajima et al, 1996), and enhanced understanding of some of the reasons for non-disclosure of QGLB sexualities. Initially researchers emphasized the risk of loss of social support from ethno-cultural communities. The taboo against talking about sexuality in general (Chan, 1992) and incomprehensibility of western sexual identity constructs in some cultures has received greater recognition within psychology recently (Herdt, 1999). Multicultural studies of QLGB sexuality in psychology are acknowledging reasons for non-disclosure and advising practitioners to culturally contextualize their understanding of healthy identity and self (Greene, 2000).

The narratives I present contribute to this contextualization. Recognizing ways of coming into enriches our understanding of the complexity of the social discourses women are navigating in their interactions as well as the array of possibilities women use in constructing sexual selves in relationships. Rather than focusing on reasons for non-disclosure, the narratives I present provide insight into an alternate process of enacting QLGB sexual self in interactions. For QLGB people of all orientations and origins, but particularly in research or counselling with women from Asian cultures, I encourage attention to ways that people may use non-verbal or indirect means to gain recognition of their same-sex relationship. In addition to Chan’s work on coming into (1993), I have found support for this concept in a recent discussion of new directions in multiethnic, racial and global queer studies (Glick, 2003; Garber, 2003). Garber noted that activists in China use the term tongshi, and are promoting coming home, rather than coming out as a
more applicable construct for understanding the nuances of bringing a QLGB or tongzhi sexuality into being in cultures organized primarily around familial relationships rather than individual identities. Recognizing ways of coming home or coming into enriches our understanding of the complexity of the social discourses women are navigating in their interactions as well as the array of possibilities women use in constructing sexual selves in relationships.

Linguistically coming into was achieved in narratives through the use of the abstract or third person, and the use of parallel examples leaving the listener to draw connections. Non-verbally, coming into was achieved by extending family rituals to include a partner. I encourage exploration of other means of coming into. In our interpretation discussions participants and I identified some of the norms and discourses that may be at work; namely silence around all sexualities and women’s and QLGB sexualities in particular, an emphasis on collective or interdependent rather than autonomous identities, and an emphasis on conveying respect through indirect communication. Further exploration of the norms and discourses that guide these interactions would be valuable. The nuances of visibility, invisibility, validation and ambiguity in experiences of coming into need further attention. I encourage counsellors to listen to their clients’ and researchers to listen to their participants’ stories for coming into as a means of bringing sexual self into relationships and to explore the potential for both validation and ambiguity.

Reflecting, during their readings and joint interpretation sessions, on their engagement with discourses in their life-stories was a revealing, and for some transformational, process for the women. Leslie commented on the reassurance and pride
she felt when she noticed how, over the course of telling her story she became more comfortable calling herself a lesbian or queer woman, something that she has been cautious about doing. She also credited herself for the strength it has taken for her to survive the isolation and discrimination she experienced. Gwen also commented on connections between they made through the reading and interpretation process and ways she is bringing her awareness of these connections to her current situation. This observation lends support to the use of discursive and narrative therapeutic approaches that encourage self and social reflexivity for who are dealing with multiple sources of oppression in their lives. Constructivist approaches to counselling, such as narrative and discursive therapies, recognize multiple interpretations of experience (Hoskins, 2002; Mahoney, 2003). Therapists engage clients in understanding their constructions of their reality, and ways that social forces constitute their realities, working the movement between these perspectives to help clients expand and contextualize their awareness of themselves and their social world (Semmler & Williams, 2000).

Implications for research on sexualities and immigration

In this study, the women construct narratives that in many ways conform to and reflect cultural discourses that essentialize sexualities. The women draw on meta-narratives of coming out, and binary constructions of gender and sexual orientation to tell their stories. However, even as they do so, they put these discourses to use in creative ways that emphasize the agency in their self construction process. Gwen draws on binary notions of “masculine” and “feminine”, but her description of “blending” her genders suggests creative and agentic construction of gender as well as mutability. At other times, the women problematize the discourses they draw on. Leslie reflects on how her
cultural context has shaped her, raising questions about how she might be different had she not left her home country. Raising these possibilities in her narrative reinforces and questions notions of a core sexual self. The women's construction of narratives consistent with modern sexual stories of coming out and discourses of core sexual self, reflect the prevalence of these discourses in our cultures and communities. By commenting on the women's use of these discourses I am not suggesting that these women are empty reflections of cultural discourses, nor are they cultural dupes. These women and I, came of age in times and places where these were the discourses available for understanding sexualities. They, like all of us, are creatively drawing on the understandings available in their communities.

In this study I present one version of the women's self-narratives, providing a view of one instance of their production of QLGB sexual self, in interaction with me. Conceptualizing sexual self as an on-going process whereby we construct and revise sexual self through our interactions, I present these stories to provide an exemplar of this interactive narrative process. Each time we construct a narrative, we work to create a story that creates some continuity of self, explaining our past in a manner that is consistent with our present self. Yet, each time we construct self-narratives, we revise them to accommodate the new interactive situation and new experiences. This on-going process of revision in different contexts opens the possibility for alternative constructions of self and QLGB sexual self. By writing narratives that display aspects of women's construction of their self-narrative and offering interpretations of these narratives, I provide a view of the discursive repertoire women are drawing on, and some of the interpretations they have made of their experiences in interaction with me. These self-
narratives should not be read as accounts of their sexual self formation process. Their conformity to discourses of essential or core sexualities should not be taken as support for existence of a core sexual self. Rather, the presence of elements of these discourses should be understood as women's creative use of available meta-narratives to understand and construct self. Further studies, perhaps over longer periods of time, investigating multiple instances of the self-narrative in different contexts would be needed to examine ways that women engage in on-going revision of their QLGB sexual self.

My study has presented the navigation of three women through an immigration process that enables and constrains women's access and options through hetronormative, racist, neocolonial, and sexist policies and practices. It contributes to a need identified by scholars of immigration and sexualities (Luibheid, 2004) by presenting richly contextualized immigration narratives of QLGB women that identify connections among gender, sexualities and immigration and settlement processes. Narratives created through negotiated interpretation create a view of the connections among women's social locations, their subjectivity, and their experience.

I have used a feminist sociocultural analysis of the dialogical construction of self to make connections between constructivist theories of self, and queer theories of gender and sexualities. My aim is to create a view of self/identity construction that values the process, and that is grounded in women's lives, acknowledging the mutually constitutive relationship between people and their social world. Glick (2003) makes a case for the need for a return to the work of feminist sociocultural theorists in multiethnic/global queer studies in order to better understand interrelatedness of race, neo-colonialism, and class with gender and sexualities (Glick, 2003). Drawing connections with constructivist
approaches to self enhances the possibility of interdisciplinary dialogue among scholars in psychology and other social sciences, by acknowledging and theorizing multiple levels of contributors to self, gender and sexualities.

Implications for Support Services

This investigation of women's narratives of their immigration process contributes to a richer view of the potential meanings QLGB women make of the process of gaining status in Canada and women's engagement with a discriminatory authority. I see their potential to sensitize immigration researchers and service providers to some of the struggles QLGBT immigrants face during the application process. The exploration and examples of meanings that these immigrating QLGB women made of the application process will enhance the support LEGIT offers to QLGB partners, giving volunteers examples to draw on at drop-ins that may provide validation of their experiences. They may also provide starting points for conversations to enhance the understanding of Canadian partners and other QLGB community members. Canadian partners who have not themselves immigrated are sometimes unaware of the issues of power and privilege that their immigrating partners are navigating in the application process.

I was impressed by the diversity of social and instrumental support that women created in their lives. Women drew on workplace contacts, ethnocultural community networks, feminist networks, QLGBT community networks and services, and online QLGBT& cultural communities to engage emotional and practical support. Although women created their own support networks, the need for on-going settlement support services specifically geared towards QLGB immigrants was raised by both Gwen and Leslie. Efforts to create support QLGBT immigrants and refugees settling in Canada may
best be directed at raising awareness and building the capacity of the sources of support women discussed in their narratives. LEGIT served as a source of support during the application process for all of the women. When Gwen used the process, LEGIT was a new organization, focusing on supporting partners using the process as a form of political advocacy. When her relationship faltered she found limited support from LEGIT or others. Over the years, as a network of successful partners grew, the organization has became the nexus of an informal support network for partners during their settlement. As the first point of contact, a trusted source of information, and informal social network LEGIT is well positioned to be a point of access for on-going settlement support services, however, the organization lacks financial resources to extend this support formally.

The narratives provide a view of the settlement challenges women faced that are common among immigrant communities: building careers, establishing new social networks, finding housing. They also provide insight into the increased complexity of meeting these challenges for QLGB immigrants. There is a need for on-going settlement support service that is sensitive to the needs and experiences of QLGB women who immigrate. This requires creating awareness and a dialogue among QLGB service providers around immigration issues. I have written narratives with the goal of creating emotional resonance and a holistic view of these women’s experiences as a means to sensitize readers. Presentation of these narratives has served to initiate conversations among future service providers and counselors and I will continue to present the narratives in formats that encourage reflexivity and dialogue.
Rigor and Validity

The growth of qualitative research in general and narrative research in particular has spawned a rethinking of evaluative criteria for such research (Hoskins, 2002; Kincheloe, 2001; Lather, 1993; Mishler, 1986). To enhance the rigor of this study, I documented my research process using the memoing function of Atlas.ti and discussed the process in regular meetings with my supervisor and conducted this inquiry with three types of validity (Lather, 1992, 1993) in mind.

First, I aimed to convey the women’s life-stories and the interpretations we co-create with “voluptuous” validity (Lather, 1992, 1993). To achieve voluptuous validity, research texts should resonate with the teller, vivify her story, convey researcher self-reflexivity, and engage the reader in inquiry. I fostered resonance for the participant/co-investigators by engaging them in interpreting their own interview transcripts and by bringing the written narratives back to them for discussion. The reflections at the end of each narrative include my reflections on my contribution to the co-construction. In these sections, I have drawn on my self-reflexive reading of the interview text to make my interpretive process and the negotiated nature of the interpretations more visible. I chose narrative forms and language that would engage an embodied response in readers. I share some of my participants reactions to reading their own stories to support the voluptuous validity of my work. Of reading her own transcript, Leslie said “I’m getting really interested into this person who is myself.” Leslie’s first email to me after I returned her story was not a ringing endorsement of resonance. In it she asked “Is this supposed to be fiction?” We met, and I learned that some of the details, such as locations, that I had changed had shifted the meanings of events. We renegotiated these details and Leslie...
then felt the story "Speaks to my experience. It tells my story, perhaps with more emotion than I would tell it, but the emotions in the story were there for me." Leslie's reaction, reflects that the story that is written, although written in the first person, holds my empathic response to her telling. As a researcher new to writing narratives, I was moved by Gwen's reaction to reading her own story "It is like having my own song sung back to me."

Second, I aimed to achieve "neo-pragmatic" validity (Lather, 1993) in my research text. My research can be evaluated on the degree to which it produces knowledge that is of some practical value to other researchers, counsellors, and service providers. This is not to suggest that I created findings generalizable to all QLGB women or all women who immigrate using the H&C immigration process for same-sex partners. Rather, I created a research text that sensitizes researchers and practitioners to issues and questions that have not been given adequate attention in the psychology literature. I have begun to use my contacts to create opportunities to present this research to researchers, counsellors, and service providers and will continue to do so. I have presented preliminary work on this study at four conferences that have attracted researchers and practitioners. The narrative format has proven an excellent vehicle for generating discussion. As a guest presenter for a master's level course Counselling and Diversity I presented excerpts from narratives and engaged students in small group and then class discussions. The discussion generated by the narratives was lively and thoughtful. LEGIT has received requests from Immigrant Support Services for assistance in building their capacity to meet the needs of QLGB immigrants and refugees. I have discussed excerpts of narratives and drafts of this discussion chapter with LEGIT.
members and they have indicated that the narratives and this study will contribute these efforts.

Third, I aimed to create texts that have "catalytic" validity (1992, 1993). The women that I interview are leading lives that bend and break conventions on a number of levels. There is much we can learn from their stories about resistance to oppression and critical engagement with discrimination. My research text can be evaluated on the extent that they convey a desire for social justice, while embracing ambiguity in the transformation process. I have written texts that emphasize the resistance, the oppositional, and the critical that already exists in daily practices. The women’s stories contain ample examples of everyday acts of resistance and the meanings women have made of these acts. Through juxtaposing the narratives, I have worked to convey heterogeneity, plurality, and difference in experience and meanings that open up possibilities of oppositional readings of the text. I sought to question current understandings, dominant narratives, and discourses. For example, by surfacing and questioning Western psychology’s emphasis on verbal disclosure, or “Coming out” I have contributed an alternative understanding of the practice of disclosure. The collaborative critical reading of the interview texts as well as juxtaposing narratives of women from different social positions has contributed to the polysemy of the text that contributes to this form of validity. Placing the narratives in the order that women initiated the application process, the research text as a whole, conveys the transformative impact that these women, in concert with other applicants, and networked with political organizations like LEGIT, have had on social institutions. I include a quote from Leslie in support of the potential catalytic validity of this research. “The more I read it the more I
need to have it out there, not just for me, but for other people. For myself anyways, if I had ever stumbled across an article with a story like this I think I would have felt I wasn't alone.”

Strengths and Limitations

*Plurality among participants.* The fact that I have involved participants from a number of different countries of origin in a single study is also a strength with limitations. I have used this plurality, juxtaposing the three narratives and then highlighting both patterns and contrasts, to bring out the multiple meanings one process or event can have. To protect the confidentiality of participants I have had to omit their nationality from the text of their narratives. As a result, some of the local and specific cultural detail is lost. As a result, there is a danger that this study will be read as a study involving “Asian lesbians” and used to reify the categorization of extremely diverse communities. It is important that the interpretations not be read as representative of all women from a region or cultural background. I have worked against this through my choice of method and in my writing, but am aware of the potential danger.

The women I interviewed used the same-sex H&C application process at different times over the decade that it was available. I decided to use this recruitment coincidence to contribute to the transformative value of my research, I arranged the narratives chronologically by application process date. I intended to create a view of ways that the process changed as more same-sex partners used the process, increasing both the accessibility of and officer’s familiarity with same-sex partner applications. I sought to emphasize that the participation of networks of citizens can transform the discriminatory
practices of social institutions. However, with only three participants, the changes in the process may not be evident to readers.

The fact that women were interviewed at different stages of their settlement process undoubtedly shaped their narratives. Leslie had lived in Canada for eight years as an international student and was interviewed as she was completing the process. Her narrative reflects the disorienting flux that she was in; conflict, struggle, chaos and disruption around the application process itself were strong features in Leslie’s narrative. For the other women, significant time had elapsed between processing and the interview: 5 years for Suzanne, 8 years for Gwen. Their narrations of the application process held less tension and conflict, while other aspects of their narratives, the break up for Gwen and career building for Suzanne, were the sites of the most intense struggle to make meaning. This variability should be taken into consideration in any discussion of the research. With greater time and resources for recruitment, participants at similar stages of the process could be recruited. Ideally, a longitudinal study could follow participants through from initial granting of status through several years of settlement.

Research process. The intensity of the joint interpretation process has been both a strength and a limitation in this study. For the women who had the time to devote to the process, our conversations brought to our awareness meanings and nuances in their story that would not have emerged otherwise. I also have greater confidence in the interpretations I have made in consultation with the participants. However, the process is a lengthy and demanding one for the participants. Suzanne was unable to participate in a joint interpretation session, and the interpretation of her story is not as rich as the others.
Navigating researcher responsibilities. The fact that QLGBT communities in Canadian cities are relatively small and well networked, and that I am part of the community in which I am conducting this research has created on-going ethical dilemmas that have impacted the research product. The involved collaborative process and very personal and detailed nature of the narratives produced has contributed to these issues. I knew or was familiar to all of my participants before the interviews. Trust and rapport came more easily because of this familiarity. In the research process, we have shared hours of intensely personal conversation; women have trusted me with their stories and I have shared some of my own experiences with them. Our relationships have deepened in the process. I have a sense of personal responsibility to them that I carry and balance with my responsibilities to QLGB and immigrant communities and to readers.

My responsibility to both dictates that I remain aware of and discuss how my relationships with the women have shaped the research product. With this aim, I have discussed the quality of the interaction in each of the texts situating the narratives. I have worked to do this in such a way that maintains the women’s experiences as the focus, while providing enough insight for the reader to evaluate the interpretations. Describing in-the-moment interactions and nuances of relationship in writing is a challenge, and this is a significant limitation of my work.

Balancing responsibility to participants and readers has also entailed making decisions about what elements are crucial to the integrity of the narrative and purpose of the research, and what elements needed to be changed or omitted to protect the confidentiality of the women as well as of third parties mentioned in their stories. These details were negotiated with the women as part of the informed consent process and
revisited at several points. Once basic identifying details like nationality were removed, 
the women tended to want to preserve as much detail as possible, and I had to emphasize 
with several, the need to consider longer term impacts and impacts for third 
parties(Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001). In these discussions, I emphasized the need 
to consider ways that their circumstances might change over the years. The informed 
consent for this research has extended far beyond a document, becoming an on-going 
process (Smythe & Murray, 2000). The process began when I asked women for input on 
what to omit from their stories, and continues now in my communication with them about 
where and how the research is being presented.

Because I was concerned about third parties in the narratives, where possible 
partners were asked to read and provide verbal consent to the final narrative. I made 
some slight changes to the content some of the stories based on requests from partners. 
In some cases, third party consent was impossible to obtain. In these situations I took 
particular care to omit or change details. There were aspects or events of the women’s 
lives that we chose to leave out and many of the details about third parties have been 
omitted or altered in an effort to protect their identities. In one narrative, I made a case 
for removing content that the participant would have preferred remain in her story. 
Ultimately, responsibility for the content lies with me, and I could not justify the risk of 
identification. This creates people and relationships in the narratives that are not as richly 
described as they could be. Aspects of the relationship may be lost as a result. Two 
points, coming into and personal metaphors, lost supporting examples because of these 
omissions. Cora’s decision to withdraw her story from the study also impacted the 
persuasiveness of the document. Her narrative contributed significantly to my
understanding of coming into. Unfortunately, without her narrative Leslie’s narrative stands as the only example of coming into and of a woman of colour’s negotiation of the application and settlement process.

The transformative potential inherent in this research process also required sensitive balancing of responsibilities to both participants and readers. I knew that the act of telling and discussing their immigration stories had both positive and negative transformative potential for the women who participated in this study. The women commented on the value of the opportunity for reflection and the empathic understanding they experienced. Leslie’s reactions show the transformative potential for participants using this method. “When you’re in it you don’t feel yourself change so much. When you read something like this..I know I have changed and I know why I’ve changed” and “It’s a safe way for you to go back into your story. It’s controlled. You can say as much as you want to and then go into it as much as you want to.” Seeing their own interviews, our joint interpretations, and my understanding of their stories in print was both disconcerting and validating for the participants. Allowing time to discuss their reactions was a crucial part of the research process. I have made decisions about what aspects of this transformation were relevant to the research question.

Opening a Conversation: My concluding remarks

Languaging sexualities is a dance with the impossible. I have struggled to perform this impossibility to present this research. Gwen, Suzanne and Leslie also engaged in this struggle to tell me their stories. Words come soaked with meanings we needed to wring out, unravel, and twist. Power charged silences created tensions we have strained against to understand and convey embodied experience. The women have
honoured me with their efforts. I have rewoven the stories they shared with me, presenting the struggles, courage, vulnerability and strength of these women. Crossing and pushing boundaries, they have stretched the limits of the possible. These stories hold their knowledge of how to survive, resist, and creatively engage, as we came to understand it in conversation. I present these stories as exemplars of some ways that QLGB women construct sexual self, making sense of major disruptions in their life-paths, their engagement with power, and changing discursive terrain. The women created stories of courage in the face of these challenges, creating more nuanced perspectives, and a participatory stance. If Gwen, Suzanne, and Leslie’s stories moved you to try to understand their lives, if they have caused you to question, if they have ignited your own courage, my efforts have been rewarded.
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## Appendix A: Collaborative Narrative Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Role of researcher</th>
<th>Role of participant /co-investigator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Telephone contact and screening</strong></td>
<td>20min</td>
<td>evaluate ability to meet time commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal: Introduce research question and collaborative research process</td>
<td>ensure caller meets criteria</td>
<td>consider interest in project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>invite caller to participate in research project</td>
<td>think about research question prior to first meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>briefly describe research question and collaborative nature of process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-interview conversation</strong></td>
<td>20 min</td>
<td>share reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal: Establish rapport for interview and collaboration</td>
<td>Discuss own experience relevant to research question</td>
<td>discuss any concerns, questions about collaborative process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss beliefs and values about collaboration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>invite reactions, concerns, questions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>invite story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview</strong></td>
<td>1-2 hours</td>
<td>share story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal: co-construct and audio-record narratives of participant/co-investigator</td>
<td>listen and respond to story</td>
<td>share reactions to telling story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>record story and take notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transcription and preparation for readings</strong></td>
<td>transcribe interview using stanza’s (Gee, 1986)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal: format transcription for reading process</td>
<td>provide participant with prepared transcripts and descriptions of readings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>drop off or mail to co-investigator</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readings:</td>
<td>Co-</td>
<td>read transcript for content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Readings:

- Co-

- read transcript for content
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<th>note any clarifications or changes in column one</th>
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<td>2) Reading for self</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Reading for context of participant/co-investigator</td>
<td>3) Reading for context of participant/co-investigator</td>
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<td></td>
<td>both read separately</td>
<td>both read separately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>read transcript for self of co-investigator make notes in column 2</td>
<td>read transcript for self of co-investigator make notes in column 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>read transcript for contextual elements make notes in column 3</td>
<td>read transcript for contextual elements make notes in column 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) Reading for researcher interactions</td>
<td>4) Reading for researcher interactions</td>
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<td>researcher only</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Listen and respond to content changes</td>
<td>Listen and respond to content changes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>invite co-investigator to share reactions from readings</td>
<td>invite co-investigator to share reactions from readings</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>write narrative that incorporates interpretations</td>
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<td>30-1hour min</td>
<td>30-1hour min</td>
<td>30-1hour min</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Responding to Narrative</strong></td>
<td>provide narrative to co-investigator</td>
<td>provide narrative to co-investigator</td>
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<td></td>
<td>invite feedback to be incorporated in discussion</td>
<td>invite feedback to be incorporated in discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>read and respond to narrative</td>
<td>read and respond to narrative</td>
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</table>
Appendix C: Description of Collaborative Narrative Process for Participants

Working through the immigration process with my partner and volunteering at LEGIT drop-ins has given me the chance to hear about the experiences of people who have come to Canada through the same-sex couple immigration process. We have some incredible stories to tell about the process of immigrating, about building new lives in Canada, and about living life as a lesbian/queer woman in different cultures. I think there is a great deal for us and others to learn from our stories. That is why I am asking you to share yours.

When we meet on Monday we’ll spend some time talking about how I can do this research in a way that protects your privacy and the privacy of others in your story. Along with the consent form we’ll look at what details you need to have removed or changed in your transcript and story.

We’ll also talk about how this research project will progress and your role in the project. I am hoping that your involvement will go beyond sharing your story and that you will collaborate with me on exploring the meanings in your story. I am inviting you to investigate your story along with me. What this would look like is after you have told me your story I would transcribe it and give you a written copy. I would also give you a set of questions to consider while you read your own transcript. You’ll have a chance to highlight important things from the transcript and jot down comments about them. I’ll do the same. You can choose how many of the questions you want to consider and how much time you put into reflecting on your interview transcript. Then we will meet a second time and have a discussion about what we each noticed from the interview transcript.

I’m doing the research this way for a number of reasons. Through our discussion I hope that my understanding of the meanings in your story will be richer. Asking you to collaborate also fits with my beliefs about research. I want to move away from treating the researcher as the only expert and instead recognize the insight you have into your own life. Finally, I want to be able to include your perspective as much as possible in the final product. For our interview please think about how you feel about being involved as a co-investigator in your own story and any questions you have about the process.

Interview

The interview is very open ended. I will ask you to tell your story and listen, ask some follow-up questions, and share some of my reactions to your story.

There are three parts of your life story I would like to hear from you.

First, tell me about your life in (HC) before you decided to move. How did you come to understand your attraction to women? How did you experience living in (HC) as a lesbian/queer woman/other term you use?
Questions to think about (just ideas – don’t feel you have to answer them all)....

What experiences in your home country have been significant in shaping your view of yourself as a lesbian/term you use?
Do you remember when you learned about the possibility of same-sex relationships in your home country?
How were same-sex relationships viewed by the people around you?
How were relationships and sexuality dealt with in your family?

The second part of your story I am interested in is how you immigrated to Canada and how the application process was for you. Questions to think about...

What has been challenging about the process?
How have you dealt with the challenges?
What impact has the process of immigrating had on you?

The final story I would like to hear from you is about your life settling in Canada. What has it been like for you as a lesbian/(word you use) in Canada? As a woman from HC? As a lesbian/queer woman? What experiences stand out as significant in shaping how you live your life here and how you view yourself?

I realize that your story may unfold somewhat differently from this structure. If it is more helpful, think about what “chapters” you would create to tell your stories of becoming a woman who is attracted to women/lesbian/queer woman and of immigrating and settling in Canada.
This is to certify that I __________________ agree to voluntarily participate in this investigation on the experiences of women who have immigrated to Canada as part of a same-sex couple. I understand that I do not have to participate and that I am free to withdraw my consent and may end my participation at any time. Choosing to end my participation will not influence my opportunity to participate in any other programs sponsored by the University of British Columbia.

This is to certify that I __________________ agree to provide the investigators with a copy of my application letter to Immigration Canada for the purposes of researching the experiences of women who have immigrated to Canada as part of a same-sex couple.

All information that is collected will remain confidential with regard to my identity. I will be identified by a pseudonym of my choice and all original data (audio-tapes, letter, and transcriptions) will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, or stored under password on a hard drive. Identifying information on the letters or transcripts will be blanked out. Only the investigators will have access to the files.

I have had a chance to ask any questions I want about this research project, and may ask more questions at any time during my participation in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

I understand that if I have any concerns about my rights or treatment as a research participant I may contact the Director of UBC Office of Research services and Administration at 604-822-8598.

_____________________________________
participant’s signature

_____________________________________
date

_____________________________________
witness
but once you start talking to someone about it
and say do you know...
I understand what your feeling
and what your feeling
could actually mean that you’re a lesbian

WHOA! that’s it NOPE
now sorry no
I have no interest at all
NOTHING no
yeah...NOT that way at all

SH: so that would shut down the relationship

L: that’s it
shut down communication
shut down the relationship
everything

the fear of being um
whatever it is that the term denotes um
signifies within the society ...

SH: Did you have that experience?

L: Yeah like I said
I would never have called myself a:
I remember I had a ...
...that’s right
we had a...

..I was in high school
and one of the girls that I liked
was in a musical (SH: mhmm)
and one of the girls that I was hanging out with
also had a crush on another girl
who was in the musical

so we were going out to see this musical
and uh and ...I can’t remember
what comments we were saying
but someone:... someone said something to the extent of
oh /tt/ give her the inner...
give her the seat
that's more to the centre of the theatre
because ...you know who she's here to see /whispering/

even that implication when my friend said
you know who she's here to see
so you better give her the inner seat so she can get closer

I ..I was VERY defensive
and I basically yelled back
and said WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT
/sharp angry/ defensive/

because the implication that people even knew
how I felt you know..
Appendix F: Interview Guide

Pre-Interview Conversation

First I wanted to thank you for meeting with me today. I will really try to wrap things up by _______ and please let me know if you need to take a break or stop before then. I wanted to spend some time talking with you about the project and your involvement in the project. Would you be interested in hearing a little about my interest in doing this research?

I’ve described myself as a lesbian for about a decade now—and have lived as a lesbian in three different countries—in Canada—both in Ontario and here, in Korea for a year as an exchange student, and in Thailand for five years. In each of these countries I’ve seen similarities and differences in how lesbians go about creating lives for themselves and understanding themselves.

I met my current partner in Thailand eight years ago. She moved to Canada with me in 1999. We used the same-sex immigration process and she was granted status last September. For me, there were a lot of feelings and issues wrapped up in preparing and sending in that application: things like worries about being turned down, some fear around being so open with the government, and real pride and validation from getting letters from family supporting us. With the anxiety of waiting over we’ve had a year to feel more settled in Vancouver and really start building a life for ourselves here. In the process I have learned a lot about my partner, myself, and our relationship. For example, I think because of moving from one culture into another as lesbians we have some special insights about how the place we are in shapes how we live our lives and understand ourselves as lesbians.

I’ve noticed while talking to couples I’ve met through LEGIT that we all have some incredible stories to tell about the process of immigrating as a lesbian or _______ and about living life as a sexual minority in different cultures. I think there is a lot for ourselves and others to learn from our stories. That is why I am asking you to share yours today.

I also wanted to talk with you about how this research project will progress and your role in the project. I am hoping that your involvement will go beyond sharing your story and that you will collaborate with me on exploring the meanings in your story. I am inviting you to investigate your story along with me. What this would look like is after you have told me your story I would transcribe it and give you a written copy. I would also give you a set of questions to consider while you read your own story. You’ll have a chance to highlight important things in your story and jot down comments about them. I’ll do the same with your story. Then we will meet and have a discussion about what we each noticed in your story. How does that sound to you?
I’m doing the research this way for a number of reasons. Alone, I can’t possibly begin to understand the meanings in your story. Through our discussion I hope that my understanding will be richer. Asking you to collaborate also fits with my beliefs about research. I want to move away from treating the researcher as the only expert and instead recognize the insight you have into your own life. Finally, I want to be able to include your perspective as much as possible in the final product. How do you feel about being involved as a co-investigator in your own story? What questions do you have?

Before we continue we need to talk about your rights as a participant/co-investigator in this project. This consent form explains that your participation is voluntary and also talks about how your privacy will be protected. I’ll read it over with you. Feel free to ask any questions along the way. (Read informed consent). What questions do you have?

*Interview*

Now we’re ready for your story. I’ll put the tape recorder here. Feel free to hit pause if when you need to take a break or if you want to stop taping for any reason.

Before we get into your story I wanted to check what term you are most comfortable using for the interview? For example, I can ask the questions using lesbian, or queer woman, or a word from your first language.

As we talked about on the phone there are three parts of your life-story I am interested in, your experience of living as a _______ in (home country), your experience of applying to settle in Canada, and your experience living in Canada. We’ll have about 30 to 40 minutes to spend on each part.

Could you begin with the first story we talked about on the phone. That is, tell me about your life in __(country of origin)__ before you decided to move. In ____________, how did you come to understand your attraction to women? How did you experience living in ____________ as a _(lesbian/ word she uses)_?

Listen, attend, reflect and ask open, follow-up questions. Share some reaction or reflection on this part of story before moving on.

The second part of your story I am interested in is how you decided to come to Canada and how the application process was for you.

Listen, attend, and ask open, follow-up questions. Share some reaction or reflection on this part of story before moving on. e.g. Your description of __ __ made me think of__ ___.

The final story I would like to hear from you is about your life settling in in Canada. What has it been like for you as a ____________, and, in as a ____________ from ____________?
Listen, attend, and ask open, follow-up questions. Share some reaction or reflection on this part of story. e.g. when you talked about... I was really struck by...

**Closing interview**

Thank you for meeting with me today and contributing your story to this project. I'll be in touch as soon as I have a transcript complete for you to look at. Can we set a date to meet again about three weeks from now?
Appendix G: Instructions for Collaborative Readings

The next step of the research process involves each of us reading our interview transcript with different “lenses”. I suggest you do each reading separately rather than trying to pay attention to all of them at once. Then, we will get together and discuss our readings.

1. Reading for content. Please edit and clarify any parts of the transcript that are inaccurate or unclear to you.

2. Reading for the research question

   I. Living a lesbian/queer woman/woman attracted to women in home country:
      How does she come to understand her feelings for/attraction to girls or women?
      What meanings does she make of these feelings?
      How does she enact her attraction?
      What cultural resources or discourses does she draw on?
      How does she understand her relationships with girls or women?
      How are relationships drawn on?

   II. Engaging in the same-sex couple immigration process:
      How does she decide to come to Canada?
      How does she learn about the same-sex partner process?
      How does she decide to apply through same-sex partner process?
      How does she experience the application process?
      What feelings does she have about the process?
      What meanings does she make of the process?

   III. Living as a lesbian/queer/woman attracted to women in Canada:
      How does she create a life for herself in Canada? (communities, work, home, family, fun..)
      How does she interpret and construct her sexuality here?
      How does she interpret and construct her ethnicity here?
      How does she interpret and construct her position as immigrant woman here?
      What new cultural resources or discourses does she draw on?

3. Critical Reading Please highlight (in yellow) and make notes in column 3.
   How does she speak of power, authority or oppression (racism, heterosexism, sexism)? What meanings does she give to power and authority in her lives?
   How does she speak of social institutions (e.g. immigration policies)?
   How did she come to learn of these social institutions?
   How does she understand their impact of these institutions on her life?
   How does she understand her interactions with these institutions?

Any questions? Please call me at (telephone #) or e-mail srjordan@interchange.ubc.ca

Thank you for your valuable participation in this research.
Appendix H: Guide for Collaborative Interpretation

Thank you for taking the time to read and interpret your own story. How was it for you to read your own story this way?

What I would like to do now is for each of us to discuss what we found in your story. Feel free to raise any questions you have about my interpretations and I will do the same for you. It is quite possible that we will see different things in our interpretations—we have different perspectives and experiences—so I hope you will feel comfortable talking about differences you hear in our interpretations. Questioning each other is one way we can explore these differences. There is room in this interpretation process for more than one meaning to come out of the same event so I won't be trying to convince you of my interpretations, rather, I would like to know you reactions to them.

Would you like to start or would you like me to?

e.g.
Here I read your comment as meaning...what do you think?
When you .... I wonder if you were reacting to....
I saw this comment here as an example of you struggling with....
In this part of your story you seem to be...whereas, in this part of your story I see you as more...
Part of what I am interested in is how women perceive their relationship to power or authority...here you are ....
Appendix I: Reflections on Interview and Transcription Process

The experience of telling and transcribing my own story has sensitized me to a number of issues in the interviewing and transcription process. Namely, that despite my efforts to tell my story with richness and detail, language experience is always partial. Secondly, I learned that I constructed my story specifically for the person I was telling it to. My perceptions about what she would or would not understand, be interested in an informed the details that I included and omitted. I was aware that in parts of my story I was drawing on stories I had constructed in other contexts. These parts flowed fairly smoothly, whereas the parts of my story that I had never told anyone were the places where and had the most difficulty articulating and I hesitated the most. In listening to and transcribing my story, I became aware that silences were reflective spaces—places where I was searching for the right word, making decisions about how far back to go, questioning whether my listener would understand, and reflecting on the meanings in a particular event. I also saw that shifts in verb tense often indicated places where I was looking back at an event from an identity perspective I had not held at the time.