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Date Dec 22, 2000
Abstract

Cultures of Resistance: Identity, Politicization and Health Promotion Among Lesbian Activists in Vancouver, B.C.

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This thesis examines the relationship between activism, identity and well-being among a small group of lesbian activists in Vancouver, B.C. It explores the idea of the margin as a site of resistance, highlighting the connection between (stigmatized) identities and resilience. The relationship between activism and mental and physical well-being is explored, political consciousness and social justice work being named as key determinants of health.

Individual interviews with 7 lesbians (the author included) who have been active in social justice work were conducted, as well as a focus group. A self-reflective exercise was also undertaken to capture the researcher’s thoughts and feelings throughout the process.

This project highlights the power of identity, however shifting and unstable it may be, in the lives of lesbian activists. Their narratives disrupt utopian visions of lesbian communities as ideologically homogeneous, stable and nurturing; Depicted is a more complex image of activist networks where differential power relations exist and certain subjectivities are privileged. Activism, despite having a negative impact on physical health, was seen to be beneficial for mental well-being, increasing the participants’ sense of purpose, connection, and power.
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Chapter One:

Cultures of Resistance: Lesbian Identity, Activism and Well-being

...resistance means opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted and destroyed by the system. The purpose of resistance, here, is to seek healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly...I think that communities of resistance should be places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness (Hahn, quotes in hooks, 1990, p. 43).

This study examines the relationship between activism, identity and well being among a small group of lesbian activists in Vancouver, B.C. When I initially began this project, I didn’t realize where it would take me. I had not anticipated doing research within my own network; in fact, the idea of that frightened me with all its messiness and potential for discord among friends and colleagues. I had been planning to look at health promotion strategies among lesbians more generally. However, after much mulling, it became apparent that what I was really talking about was the intersection between lesbian identity and well-being and the relation of both those things to politicization and activism. Moreover, I realized that in order to investigate this connection, I would be conducting my research very close to home.

There are significant gaps in the existing lesbian health literature. Studies to date have focused on two main areas: articulating barriers to care for lesbians and possible strategies for remedying them (Rankow, 1995; Cassidy and Hughes, 1996; Rosser, 1992) and epidemiological or clinical care issues (Saunders, 1999; Solarz, 2000; Bradford and White, 2000). Existing research turns its gaze upon the system(s) and institutions of health care, looking almost exclusively at issues of policy and practice. While this research is valuable, there has been scant attention paid to what happens outside of the
mainstream health care system to promote well-being among lesbians. There is a lack of understanding of lesbians' conceptions of health and illness and little focus on understandings of health that lie outside of the traditional biomedical model.

When I first began to look at lesbian health issues, I was struck by a key argument in the literature. Many studies asserted that lesbians do not access the health care system the way that heterosexual women or gay men do (Stevens, 1996; Rosser, 1993; Solarz, 2000; Eliason, 1996). These researchers documented low rates of health care utilization and attributed this to systemic barriers within the health care system. As I read this again and again, I wondered why no one was asking the question that seemed logically to follow: if lesbians are not accessing the mainstream health care system, how are we taking care of ourselves? What activities might be promoting the health of lesbians outside of the traditional medical institutions?

In the fall of 1997, I came together with a small, ad hoc group of women to discuss lesbian health research and develop a proposal for a community-based project. We mulled over research questions and discussed possible methodologies, quickly realizing that we needed to think more about our conceptions of health and its determinants. We decided to start with ourselves and did a narrative exercise to explore our own biographies and health histories. We told our stories, weaving together understandings of identity, community and well-being.

When we began to analyze our narratives, some common themes emerged. Although we came from different places (geographic, political, philosophical) and were diverse in terms of age, race and culture, we all identified as lesbians and shared a history
of involvement in political activism. All of us had worked, in both paid and unpaid roles, in social justice movements. We had been involved in anti-war movements; feminist, arts and environmental organizing; queer rights work; and anti-racist and anti-imperialist activism. Significantly, it became clear that identity and activism impacted our health and well-being, although the relationship between them was multifarious.

As I thought more about these connections, I began to hear women in my networks addressing this relationship. Once my ear was tuned into the question, I began to make the links. Over dinner, on dog walks, at meetings, many of my friends and colleagues talked in an informal way about the impact of lesbian identity and activism on their sense of well-being. While these women utilized the mainstream health care system, it was only one factor (and for many, a minor one at that) in maintaining or promoting their health. For a number of my friends and colleagues, a positive lesbian identity, connections with community$^2$ and involvement in political organizing were key determinants of health.

Although this research is not focusing on the barriers and systemic oppressions that lesbians face in the health care system, I want to be clear that I am not denying that these barriers exist nor minimizing the impact they have on women’s lives. Throughout this project, I have been concerned with the political implications of talking about resistance and what I have come to see as the protective function of identity. I have worried that I might appear polly-anna ("let’s just ignore oppression and look on the

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1 When I talk about the health care system, I am referring to the institutions of Western medicine and practices which rely on the biomedical model of health. I am not referring to alternative medicine or systems based on other healing traditions.

2 Numerous scholars have debated the meaning of the word “community”, particularly in relation to lesbian identity (Phelan, 1989, 1994; Ross, 1995; Fuss, 1991). My use of it here follows Shane Phelan’s (1994) argument that, despite the downfalls and disappointments of the belief in community, the concept still
bright side of lesbian identity!) or that my work could be removed from its context and put to use by those organizing against queer\(^3\) rights. This project does not aim to obscure power differences in society or to provide the Right with ammunition to fight equity seeking movements. It does, however, attempt to complicate the image of lesbian identity as a solely marginalized one and to explicate the relationship between identity, activism, and well-being.

The Medicalization of Lesbianism

In doing political work around lesbian health, people have asked repeatedly why lesbian health is an issue; it is often assumed that lesbian health issues are the same as those of heterosexual women or gay men. The historical medicalization of same sex desire and the interlocking legacies of homophobia, racism, classism and sexism in the health care system have informed both the truths of science and popular discourse on gender and sexuality (Stevens and Hall, 1991; Gilman, 1985, 1992). Examining the history of lesbians' treatment within the health care system provides the context for exploring lesbian resistance and its relationship to the promotion of well-being.

At the turn of the 20\(^{th}\) century in North America and Europe, pseudo-scientific definitions of the sexual invert became entrenched in the medical discourse. Medicine's power lay in its authority to define normalcy, and to construct culturally acceptable behaviours and identities. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, a psychiatrist at the University of Vienna in the late 1800s was one of the key proponents of the bio-medical model of

\(^3\) The term queer has come to be used as an identity, for both individuals and for the larger collectivity of sexual minority people (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender). This use of the term, while common, contradicts the key arguments behind queer theory's deconstruction of identity politics (Fuss, 1991; Jagose,
sexuality. He defined the causes of lesbianism as "hypersexuality and automasturbation" (Munt, 1998, p. 61), and developed detailed diagnostic criteria for the ailment of lesbianism.

The work of the early sexologists built on Krafft-Ebing's definition of homosexuality as a disease, seeing it as the result of genetic anomalies; it was a "congenital constitutional weakness", an "inborn predisposition to perversion", or "hereditary taint" (Stevens and Hall, 1991, p. 295). This perversity was seen as both dangerous and contagious. Consequently, many lesbians and gay men were confined in psychiatric and medical institutions to protect the virtuous from contamination.

The Production of Knowledge: Lesbians as Raced, Gendered and Classed

The technical presentation of medical and scientific knowledge often obscures the construction of this knowledge as fact. Science is most often presented as truth, camouflaging the hegemonic assumptions that infuse its development. The relationship between social and medical discourses is a dialectical one; social context is the foundation for the development for scientific knowledge and that knowledge, in turn, becomes a resource for manufacturing social reality (Findlay, 1993).

In the 20th century in North America, the cross fertilization between popular and medical discourses ensured that lesbians, by virtue of their sex, were "ensnared in an ideological netherworld between immorality and madness" (Stevens and Hall, 1991, p. 294). The discursive associations between bodily disease, gender transgression and aberrant morality created vivid images of lesbians. Many scientific studies were based on

1996; Butler, 1991). While my use of the terms "queers" and "queer women" in this thesis reflects my reliance on this shorthand, I do not intend to imply stability or sameness within this identity.
data from pulp novels and tabloids, and bolstered by interviews with prison inmates and sex trade workers.

Physicians developed lists of physical and behavioural characteristics that could be used to detect lesbianism. Among the bodily signs were wider shoulders, greater height, excessive body hair and firmer muscles. Behaviours that could be considered unconventional or gender-inappropriate (i.e., involvement in skilled labour, dedication to career, involvement with social movements) were also considered part of the diagnostic criteria for lesbianism (Stevens and Hall, 1991).

Eugenic and bio-deterministic discourses on sexuality were informed by prevailing gendered, raced and classed discourses (Gilman, 1985; Munt, 1998). From the late 19th Century, the bodily signs used by the sexologists to detect lesbianism were indicative of raced and class-based understandings of gender and morality. Indeed, early sexologists were guided by anthropological work on racial classification that equated degeneracy and abnormality with physical markers (Sommerville, 1994).

Many of the diagnostic criteria for lesbianism (i.e.: firmer muscles, wider shoulders and slim hips) were likely the result of manual labour, the work most often carried out by working class women. Others, like “excessive” body hair, demonstrate the employment of a never-declared yet ever-present ideal of white (read hairless, pure, clean) womanhood. The women who became the focus of medical studies on female sexuality were often captive subjects: prostitutes, prisoners and women contained within psychiatric asylums, all of whom were more likely to come from the ranks of the poor and communities of colour (Stevens and Hall, 1991; Munt, 1998).
The cross-fertilization between medical and popular gender discourses created and exaggerated vivid images of the third sex, a man trapped in a woman’s body, the mythical masculine lesbian. Like other eugenics discourses focused on criminals, the poor and people of colour, scientific work on homosexuality was aimed at instituting social controls and maintaining social structures such as the heterosexual nuclear family, racial divisions and the gendered division of labour (Gilman, 1985; Kitzinger, 1987); the sexologists discursively linked the burgeoning first wave feminist movement with the identifiable disease of lesbianism (Kitzinger, 1987). Creating the spectre of the predatory lesbian, with her life of pain, violence and inevitable tragic death no doubt reinforced the heteronormative status quo.

The Legacy of Homophobia in Health Care

Given the historical relationship between sexual minorities and the medical establishment, one would expect considerable barriers for lesbians attempting to access the health care system. While the work of the sexologists is no longer explicitly used in most medical curricula, its power has not been vanquished (Stevens and Hall, 1991). Indeed, sexological theories still inform both medical and popular understandings of sexual and gender diversity. This manifests in heterosexist assumptions embedded in policies and procedures as well as in interpersonal expressions of homophobia by physicians and other health care providers (Stevens, 1996; Saunders, 1999). Qualitative research on lesbians’ experiences with health care providers demonstrates the systemic obstacles that many lesbians face (Denenberg, 1995; Rosser, 1993).

While it is often assumed that honesty, respect and confidentiality are the cornerstones of the patient-health care provider relationship, this is often not the case for
lesbians, for whom the disclosure of a lesbian identity may have negative consequences. In a recent study of nurse educators in the United States, 25 percent said lesbianism is "immoral" and "wrong" and 52 percent believed that lesbians should undergo treatment to "become heterosexual" (Rankow, 1995). A recent survey of American Association of Physicians for Human Rights found that 67 percent reported instances where lesbian, bisexual or gay patients had been refused care or had received substandard care because of their sexual orientation (Rankow, 1995).

The presumption that all women partner with men guides the policies and practices of health care and often renders lesbians invisible. To ensure that adequate care is provided, lesbians must make a declaration of their sexual identity or sexual practices. This disclosure is often met with disgust, fear, hostility, or misunderstanding and the anticipation of such a reaction may discourage a woman from being out (Rankow, 1995). The fear of homophobia and heterosexism means that some lesbians have little choice but to pass as heterosexual in health care settings, providing incomplete or inaccurate information in an effort to camouflage their identity. In an effort to avoid this negotiation of identity, many lesbians simply go without medical care (Rosser, 1993; Stevens, 1998). Despite the documented low rates of health care utilization among lesbians, to my knowledge, there has not been an investigation of how lesbians maintain or promote their health in the face of systemic barriers.

**Silences around Race and Class in Lesbian Health Research**

While the research to date has explored the inter-related impacts of homophobia and misogyny on lesbians' ability to access medical care, most studies on lesbian health do not address issues of race, class, disability or gender. Underlying this silence is an
essentialist and universal logic that assumes the barriers to health care, and solutions to them, are the same for all lesbians. The few studies that do mention the relationship between race, class, gender, disability and sexuality tend to use an additive model of oppression, employing the concept of “double” or “triple jeopardy” to address the issues of lesbians of colour, First Nations lesbians and working class lesbians (Saunders 1999). Such models create the universal lesbian, naming the white, middle class, university educated, urban, able-bodied, androgynous lesbian as the norm.

Anti-racist thinkers (Collins, 1990; McClintock, 1995; hooks, 1984, 1992) have argued for an analysis that examines how systems are interdependent, indeed, co-created. This critique has its root in work by women of colour (Alarcon, 1990; Khan, 1999; Moya, 1997), First Nations women (Chrystos, 1983), and working-class women (Penelope, 1994) who have challenged white lesbian feminists for ranking oppressions, with sexism and heterosexism at the forefront. This strategy, predominant in both queer rights work and lesbian feminist organizing, names only the marginalization based on sexuality and gender and further obscures issues of racism, classism and ableism, both in the larger world and within queer communities. To do so compartmentalizes interdependent identities, ignoring the mutually constituted nature of oppressions (Fellows and Razack, 1998; Holmes, 2000; McMichael and Wallace, 1999).

The Women’s Health and Health Promotion Movements

Writing and activism on lesbian health began within the larger women’s health movement, a movement that has coupled the provision of support services with active struggle for change in health policy, practice and research. The women’s health
movement has critiqued the traditional biomedical model of health and has offered up new understandings of illness, health and healing (Rose, 1990). This tactic positioned women’s health groups simultaneously inside and out of the mainstream health care system, developing alternatives from outside and pushing for reform from within. The reformists pushed for the development of “women centred care” while grassroots groups developed alternative models based on the concepts of mutual aid and self help, community development, and alternative medicine/holistic healing (Rose, 1990).

Like much feminist organizing, the women’s health movement has been dominated by the concerns of more privileged women (Ruzek, Clarke & Olesen, 1997; Franke, 1997). Most research in the women’s health field focuses on the category of ‘woman’, without specifying to whom ‘woman’ refers. What is assumed is that the woman in women’s health research is the white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class woman. The majority of mainstream women’s health research continues to employ a universalized ideal of (white) womanhood and ignore constructivist and anti-racist contributions to feminist theorizing. While a few studies have made attempts to “diversify” the participants, the majority of research has not incorporated an analysis of the inter-relationship between determinants of health (Ruzek, Olesen & Clarke, 1997). Recently, writings focusing on the specific health issues of women of colour (for example, White, 1990) have spoken back to the whitewashing of women’s health research.

The health promotion movement, like the women’s health movement, has emerged in opposition to traditional health discourses and practices. Until recently, the

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4 In using the term “women of colour”, I don’t intend to gloss over the particularities among women of diverse racial, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
dominant paradigms in health education tended to conceptualize health as an individual lifestyle issue and to see health education as the transmission of biomedical knowledge from the health care practitioner to the patient (Raeburn, 1992). This sharing of information was seen as the way to change behaviour and to promote health. Health promotion, as a social movement, aims to broaden the definition of health and its determinants to include the social/political and economic context within which health and ill health are produced and experienced (Labonte, 1993). Health promotion goes beyond the confines of individual, clinical issues and focuses on social and political strategies for achieving health, empowerment of both individuals and communities playing a pivotal role (Robertson and Minkler, 1994).

As health promotion weaves the macro or structural aspects of health with individualistic conceptualizations, it provides a more thorough understanding of well-being in marginalized communities (Ruzek and Hill, 1986). Its emphasis on the socio-political context situates health within power relations. Influenced by feminist and other anti-oppression struggles, health promotion reframes power as “power to” rather than the traditional understanding of power as domination, or “power over” (Robertson and Minkler, 1994). Thus, the goals of community based health promotion are to facilitate communities articulating their own health issues and priorities and identifying solutions to them. The resources of communities, the meanings they attribute to health and illness, their competencies and problem solving capabilities are acknowledged and encouraged.

**Rejecting the Disease Model**

My research utilizes the definition of health developed by both the women’s health and health promotion movements. It is an understanding of health as broader than
a disease, or bio-medical model. Within this framework, health is seen to be determined by a number of factors, including social and political realities like racism, poverty, heterosexism and other systemic oppressions (Robertson and Minkler, 1994). Unlike a disease model, health promotion recognizes that experiences of health are fluid, historically situated and constructed through "social interaction with others and our shared repertoire of intersubjective meanings" (Labonte, 1993).

Within this model, health is not simply quantifiable and the measurements may be incongruous with those normally associated with medical research. As Labonte (1993) argues, conventional medical thinking presents a continuum with disease on one end and health on the other, seeing them as opposite ends of the same thing. Challenging this model, Labonte offers an alternative understanding, one that sees health and disease as discrete. This model recognizes that the experience of being "healthy" may be separate from disease: I might have some medical pathology (like cardiovascular disease) yet I might have a profound sense of well-being. This sense of my own health may come from having meaning in my life, having a sense of control over my destiny and being spiritually content.

As health promotion scholars have argued, defining health in terms of disease determines the questions being asked about well-being. To date, the majority of health research has been quantitative, focused on surveys, morbidity and mortality reports, and epidemiological charting (Labonte, 1993). Challenging the positivistic foundations of the disease model (i.e.: health can be objectively measured and understood), a health promotion model understands health as a socially constructed phenomenon and enables us to explore the determinants of well-being in a more nuanced way. It means seeing
health as connected to the "historic, gendered, class-based and cultural forms of oppression, expression and liberation" (Labonte, 1993).

Rejecting the disease-based understanding of health turns our attention to the experience of well-being. Health promotion thinkers (for example, Blaxter, 1990) have identified the following descriptive categories in an effort to define well-being:

1) feeling vital and full of energy
2) having good social relationships
3) experiencing a sense of control over one's life and one's living conditions
4) being able to do things one enjoys
5) having a sense of purpose in life
6) experiencing a sense of connectedness to "community"

Marginality and Resistance

Much of the health promotion literature and contemporary cultural studies scholarship implicitly acknowledges that a community's capacity and relative lack of power are not mutually exclusive (hooks, 1990; Labonte, 1989; D'Augelli, 1989; Phelan, 1994). Instead of seeing marginalized groups as solely and simply powerless, some scholars (Phelan, 1994; Ross, 1995; Anzaldúa, 1983) have articulated "marginality as (a) site of resistance" (hooks, 1990, p. 341). This perspective acknowledges the protective functions of identity and sees marginalized identity as key to the development of oppositional consciousness and political action.

More than a site of deprivation and despair, marginalization can give birth to a process of politicization, become a place of action, and enable the reclamation and
reinterpretation of socially derided identities (Phelan, 1994; Gamson, 1995; Mihn-ha, 1990; Anzaldúa, 1990; hooks, 1990). bell hooks (1990) has written about marginality as sustaining:

I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the centre, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds (p. 341).

Understanding our place on the margins as solely about our pain, our deprivation, would render us hopeless, inconsolable and consequently, paralysed. This is not to romanticize the margin; certainly, for queers, homophobia creates shame, self-hatred and isolation. However, it is to recognize marginality as both a site of repression and resistance. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) has written “shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another” (p. 5), offering a new space of possibility once one is cast out of the fold. For many, shame facilitates a kind of agency; it can mobilize for the re-creation of self as well as for social change.

While the work of the sexologists pathologized lesbians, it also provided a vocabulary for many women to name their experience at a time when love between women was hidden. As evidenced by the narratives of lesbians in the mid-1900s in North America, it was through naming their identity that they were able to repossess and shift the intra-subjective meaning of that identity (Nestle, 1992; Kennedy and Davis, 1993). As lesbian historian Lillian Faderman (1991) remarked, “if the work of the sexologists did not create a lesbian subculture, they certainly were the midwives to it” (p. 60).

American lesbian historians (Nestle, 1992; Kennedy and Davis, 1993; Faderman, 1991) have documented a process of reclamation and resistance in their examination of
butch and femme identities and relationships in working-class lesbian communities. These writers have disagreed about the foundation and historical development of butch/femme roles, some suggesting that these roles were simply a mimicking of heterosexual relationships or an unconscious playing out of the sexologists’ script (Faderman, 1991). Others have argued that butches and femmes were pioneers in gender deconstruction and that these roles reflected a lesbian-specific reworking of individual and collective representation (Nestle, 1992).

These opposing views alternatively portray lesbians as passive receptors of heteronormative templates, or as existing in a cultural vacuum, creating culture untouched by dominant ideologies. Challenging the binary logic of these arguments enables us to examine how hegemonic discourses are resisted, derided identities reclaimed and dominant representations reinterpreted. It complicates our understanding of identities as uni-dimensional and illuminates the process by which lesbians have refashioned identities, imbuing them with meanings that sustain and promote well-being.

**Essentialism, Identity and Regimes of Truth**

In thinking about the relationship between identity, activism and well-being, I have bumped up against static, universal notions of identity and reified understandings of community. Talking about the benefits and drawbacks of “lesbian identity” or “community” is a dangerous enterprise; even using the words implies an endorsement of essentialism and a belief in the liberal notion of a universal subject. I do not intend either. Instead, I am interested in trying to deconstruct essentialist notions of identity while honouring the importance that identity holds for the group of lesbian activists I interviewed.
This research examines "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1984, p. 74), both in the literature on lesbian health and in the discourses of lesbian activists, exploring the embedded assumptions and knowledge produced in both academic research and community organizing. Doing so highlights the contradictions in the notions of identity proposed by activists and ruptures the image of the passive victim offered by the lesbian health literature. It challenges the discourses of the "barriers to care" literature, namely that lesbian identity is solely marginal and that homophobia/heterosexism within the health care system is the key determinant of health. This research also complicates the "regimes of truth" in the limited research on lesbian feminist communities, offering a view of identity and community that is shifting and unstable.

In examining the stories of lesbian activists I interviewed, small tears emerge in the fabric of binary, essentialist discourses. While honouring the importance of lesbian identity in their daily lives, my discussions with the participants also generated questions about the importance of identity in community organizing, the ideologically preferable but unrealistic notion of community as "home" or "family", and the impact of activism on physical and mental well-being.

This research also examines the relational nature of subjectivities and investigates the binaries of margin/centre, hetero/homo, inside/outside. The boundaries between these categories are interconnected, existing only in relation to one another. As Stuart Hall (1996) argues

... identities are constructed through, not outside difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through relation to the Other, the relation to what is not, to precisely what is lack, to what has been called its constitutive outside, that the 'positive' meaning of any terms and thus its 'identity' can be constructed (p. 4).
The privileging of one category is reliant on the subordination of the other, although this relationality is often masked by a process of legitimization and naturalized (Fuss, 1991; Butler, 1991; Cohen, 1991). Furthermore, the boundary between categories is itself taken for granted as fixed and stable, instead of as permeable and prone to dilution. The narratives of the lesbian activists I interviewed illustrate the shaky ground on which binaries like margin/centre rest, complicating notions of self, community and offering a complex portrait of well-being and its determinants.

**Social Location and the Researcher/Participant Dichotomy**

Researching and writing about the relationship between identity, activism and well-being has been a way for me to theorize about the complexities of political organizing and to put some of my own experiences in a larger context. By doing so, I am not claiming to be the definitive voice on lesbian identity or activism but attempting to make visible the ways in which I am both implicated in and marginalized by societal power relations.

Placing myself in the research is a way to acknowledge that I carry the privilege of being middle class, university-educated and able-bodied. It honours the ambiguous place of my mixed heritage; although in many contexts I carry white privilege (i.e.: in Vancouver, where there are few Arab people and consequently, most put me in the generic, 'not Anglo' box), I am also informed by my own experiences of racism. It gives me a place to talk about how I experience marginalization as a lesbian in the health care system and how I resist medicalized notions of identity.

Placing myself in the research does more than tell the reader who I am. It reflects my theoretical position that who I am profoundly informs what I see, the questions I ask,
the answers I hear. Locating my subject position challenges positivist epistemologies and speaks back to notions of objectivity and neutrality in research. It allows me to fully explore both sides of the researcher/participant dichotomy and to attempt to break down that divide, not just theoretically, but in the practice of conducting and participating in the research.

Research Design

As mentioned, this research project examines the relationship between identity, political activism and well-being among a group of lesbian activists in Vancouver, B.C. The participants in this study included the members of the initial ad hoc group I discussed at the opening of this chapter, as well as three other women active within networks of lesbian activists in Vancouver. Finding its beginning in the silences within academic lesbian health literature, this study deconstructs the boundaries between margin and centre, exploring the benefits and drawbacks of lesbian identity and looking at the impact of activism, both positive and negative, on the health of the participants.

Central to this project is the weaving together of disparate theoretical orientations. I have struggled to talk about lesbian identity and community, both slippery concepts, without reifying either. Drawing on feminist postmodern, lesbian feminist, poststructuralist, anti-racist and queer theories, I have tried to reconcile my own assertions and those of the study participants with a non-essentialist theoretical framework. In the second chapter, I explore the theoretical tools I used in analyzing the research data and examine the possibilities of bridging disjunctive theories. While Chapter 2 provides a bird’s eye perspective on my theoretical framework, Chapters 4 and 5 illustrates the application of my theoretical orientation to the data from the interviews.
and focus group; I have incorporated the literature review into the chapters focusing on data analysis, a strategy that I believe makes the theory come alive.

Chapter 3 examines the qualitative methodological approaches I utilized in carrying out this research. My role in conducting this research reflects Michelle Fine's (1992) analogy of the hyphen. Instead of perpetuating the dichotomies of identity (self and other), she uses the hyphen as a bridge (self-other). Like a physical bridge, the hyphen is a place of both separation and merging, a place where we are simultaneously inside and out. Traditionally, the interconnected relationship between researcher and subject has been hidden, many researchers preferring the relative simplicity of anonymity and detachment to the complexities of self-revelation and engagement. My own identity as a lesbian, my involvement in social justice work and my close ties with the participants made my engagement both necessary and inevitable. In this chapter, I highlight some of the difficulties I encountered conducting research within my own network and explore the benefits of such a strategy.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the narratives of the seven participants (including myself) and explore our understandings of identity, activism and well-being. Chapter 4 demonstrates both the primacy and ambivalent nature of identity, with the participants at times espousing essentialist theories and others, disavowing them. It looks at the dominant discourses in lesbian feminist writing and challenges the utopian, reified vision of the stable, harmonious lesbian activist community. I also examine the notions of the “necessary fiction” and “strategic essentialism” as cunning examples of reconciling divergent realities with collective identity, for the benefit of political change.
Chapter 5 looks at the meaning(s) of well-being, and explores the differential impact of political organizing work on the mental and physical health of the participants. Here, I explore the definitions of activism that the participants utilized, and examine the impact of politicization and activism on the participants’ health. In Chapter 6, I conclude the thesis by summarizing my findings, examining the implications of this study for future research and offering suggestions for more sustainable, health promoting activism.
Chapter 2:

A Marriage of (In)convenience: Reconciling Divergent Theories

This thesis utilizes a constellation of theories to question, explicate and understand the relationship between lesbian identity, activism and well-being. Utilizing feminist, postmodern, anti-colonial and queer theories, I have tried to make sense of the complex relationship between them. This theoretical orientation has guided me as I developed my research questions, conducted interviews, and analyzed the stories of the women I interviewed. It shaped both the questions I asked and the conclusions, however, partial and situated, I have come to. In this chapter, I outline the different, and sometimes disparate, theories that informed my questioning and analysis, highlighting the tensions between them and the places where they complement one another.

Rupturing Metanarratives and Integrating Disparate Theories

My research is underpinned by a number of different theoretical frameworks, some of which are both complementary and contradictory. Feminist, postmodern, anti-colonial and queer theories have provided me with tools to understand the narratives told to me and by me in this project. These frameworks informed the questions I asked, how I listened to the stories told to me, and how I came at my analysis of the data. Social movement theory has provided some insight into the formation of social justice movements and the role of identity in political mobilization. Critical health promotion theory pushed me to question the meaning of well being, and to examine the relationship
between resistance and health for the network of lesbian activists I interviewed. In weaving together diverse theoretical understandings, I realized that no one was sufficient to illuminate the stories I was told nor the one I needed to tell.

Throughout this project, I have struggled to balance the "unsettling theories" (Newman, 1997, p. 1) of feminist, postmodern, anti-colonial and queer thinking with the more materially based perspectives of health promotion and social movement (including feminist materialist) theories. This has meant trying to talk about notions of lesbian identity and "community" without reifying these categories. It has meant thinking about identity as unstable and shifting while simultaneously reflecting on the very real meaning of lesbian identity in my life and in the lives of the women I interviewed. As bell hooks (1994) has noted:

"a totalizing critique of 'subjectivity, essence, identity' can seem very threatening to marginalized groups, for whom it has been an active gesture of political resistance to name one's identity as part of a struggle to challenge domination" (p. 78).

Challenging Notions of Objectivity

Fundamentally, my theoretical orientation rejects positivist traditions that see research as ahistorical, value-neutral, and divorced from social context. Feminist, queer, anti-colonial and poststructuralist theories have argued that knowledge and research are socially constructed and implicated in power relations. Donna Haraway's work (1991) on feminist objectivity is particularly helpful in showing how our understandings are provisional and shifting. Such theoretical and methodological approaches challenge positivist assumptions about knowledge and knowledge production and provide models.

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5 I use the term anti-colonial instead of the more commonly used 'post-colonial'. This usage is informed by Grewal and Kaplan (1994) who have argued that the term 'post' serves to deny, or obscure, the continuance of colonialism in the present time.
for weaving subject and object together. Seeing knowledge production as related to social location enables the researcher to illuminate the ways in which our subjectivities influence the research process.

**Feminist Postmodernism**

Postmodern approaches disrupt totalizing assumptions and challenge essentialist notions of identity (Lather, 1991; Butler, 1991; Razack, 1998). Postmodernism covers a myriad of different but related perspectives, the key assumptions being that knowledge production is not a neutral process, and that the subject is unstable and constantly shifting. As Mercer (1994) asserts,

> In philosophical terms, postmodernism has been discussed as a weakening, fading or relativization of the absolutist or universalist values of the Western Enlightenment. The master narratives are collapsing, which is to say that we no longer have the confidence to invest belief in the foundational myths of inevitable human rationality or social progress (p. 265).

Postmodernism also offers a critique of the implicit binaries in the meta-narratives of Western epistemology (Grewal, 1994). This enables us to see how identity categories are dependent on one another for their very existence and offers insight into processes of identity formation and resistance among marginalized peoples. I have found this particularly helpful for examining the historical conflation of lesbian identity with disease and the contemporary development of lesbian communities.

Postmodern tools for analysis, such as deconstruction and discourse analysis, provide a means for unpacking unconscious assumptions and rupturing universalizing explanations. My research has been informed by Foucault's understanding of discourse and knowledge (1980). A discourse can be understood as “a set of assumptions, socially shared and often unconscious, reflected in language” (Ristock and Pennell, 1996, p. 114).
Foucault (1978) describes discourses as being shifting and unstable and articulates how discourse can be used by both dominant and marginal groups: “discourse can be an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (p. 101). In this project I am not interested in examining only the dominant discourses, but also in looking at the prevailing assumptions that circulate in the margins. Disrupting the margin/centre dichotomy enables us to see how discourse foregrounds particular (privileged) subjectivities within marginalized communities.

It is in this way that power and knowledge interconnect, with certain discourses or knowledges being legitimized and others being subjugated or excluded (Foucault, 1980). Through unconscious assumptions, discourse structures “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1984), dictating what we can say, and defining what is true or real. I am particularly interested in excavating truths about lesbian identity and unpacking assumptions (often utopian) about lesbian feminist organizing.

While postmodern theories carry overtly political implications, they do not explicitly support a revolutionary agenda. It is because of this political ambivalence that many feminist, anti-colonial and anti-racist scholars have questioned the usefulness of postmodernism for promoting social change (Huyssen, 1993; Moya, 1997). While I share the misgivings of many of these scholars, I have found postmodern notions of discourse helpful for illuminating the dominant tales in lesbian health literature and enabling me to see the creative development and strategic use of oppositional discourses among lesbian activists.
In this study, I have used discourse analysis and deconstruction as tools for examining the discourses that participants use to construct meaning of their involvement in social activism and to understand its impact on well-being. Like Ristock (1998) and Holmes (2000), my research pays attention to the material conditions of lesbians' lives, not divorcing the analysis from the realities of systemic oppression.

**Social Movement Theory**

Examining the relationship between politics and collective action has been a major focus of inquiry in the social sciences. Research has documented the necessity of pre-existing group ties and consciousness for the development of social movements (D'Emilio, 1983). Informal links between politically-minded community members are depicted as building blocks, the foundational structure that gives shape to larger processes of social change and activism. Social movement theorists have argued that collective identity is key in politicizing movement participants (Epstein, 1987) and that this shared identity enables members to interpret their experience of injustice as macro-structural: "...identity construction processes are crucial to grievance interpretation in all forms of collective action" (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, p. 104).

Both within and outside of the feminist movement, lesbians have built institutions such as lesbian feminist presses, women's music festivals, grassroots organizations, health centres as well as less tangible elements of shared culture such as aesthetics and symbols (Ross, 1995; Taylor and Rupp, 1993). In many cities in North America, these community-based institutions have provided the foundation for political organizing around a wide variety of issues. Indeed, it has been noted that early lesbian feminist organizing provided a model for other groups to mobilize, particularly gay men around the AIDS crisis (Braine,
1994). Despite this involvement and leadership, lesbian activism has received scant attention in the social movements literature.

Women of colour, First Nations women, working class women, transgendered women and women with disabilities have offered clear critiques of both the feminist and lesbian-feminist movements for utilizing as additive model, focusing solely on sexist and heterosexist oppression. White, able-bodied, middle class, biologically female womanhood was (and in most cases still is) the foundation for many of the institutions built through feminist activism (hooks, 1984; Ross, 1995; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1983; Uttal, 1990). These critiques challenge simplistic notions of collective identity, offering a more complex analysis. Moving beyond additive models of identity complicates social movement theory's (and Western feminism's) assumption of universal, stable womanhood and poses important questions about the relationship between identity, community and activism.

Social movement theorists have articulated the necessity of political organizing around marginalized identities. In particular, gay liberationists have made links between the civil rights movement and gay and lesbian rights. As Steven Epstein (1987) argues:

How do you protest a socially imposed categorization, except by organizing around the category? Just as blacks cannot fight the arbitrariness of racial classifications without organizing as blacks, so gays could not advocate the overthrow of the sexual order without making their gayness the very basis of their claims (p. 73).

Epstein acknowledges the essentialist logic embedded in identity politics, recognizing that “this form of political expression simultaneously imposes a ‘totalizing’ sameness within the group: It says, this is who we ‘really are’” (p. 75).

Identity Politics and Essentialism
Judith Butler has argued that feminism, as one variety of identity politics, is grounded on the stability of an essentialist notion of the category ‘woman’ (1991). In examining the history of Western feminism, Butler attempts to explain why rallying around the identity of woman has created exclusions and divisions among women, particularly along lines of race and class. Organizing around this coherent identity not only engenders sameness within the group, but demands a “‘totalizing’ sameness” within the individual, whitewashing other identities that intersect with gender:

If one “is” woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered “person” transcends the specific paraphenalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained (p. 81).

Postmodern and queer theories, unlike much writing on social movements, see deconstructing naturalized categories as a precursor to the development of political strategies. As many postmodern, anti-colonial and queer scholars have argued, the sameness that is presumed to be requisite for social movements also works to exclude many and to limit the possibilities for social change (Butler, 1991; Silvera, 1990; Razack, 1998). While postmodern theoretical understandings challenge the oversimplification implicit in identity politics, they fail to explain the continued appeal of organizing around shared identity and a collective sense of marginalization.

Queer Theory

Queer theory has developed from a rich history of both scholarship and activism. Although strongly influenced by the constructionist legacy of postmodernism, queer
theory has also been informed by lesbian feminism and by social movements such as civil rights and gay liberation (Jagose, 1996). Queer theory challenges essentialist notions, blurring boundaries, deconstructing taken-for-granted dichotomies (such as gay/straight) and situating identity in a social and historical context.

Constructionist theories see clear, collective identities as barriers to political resistance and social change. Challenging social movement theories that see coherent collective identities as the foundation of mobilization and political action, queer theory argues that it is socially produced binaries like gay/straight, black/white, and man/woman that are the basis of oppression. In queer theory, it is the disrupting of these categories, not organizing around them, that is the key to liberation (Martin, 1998); As Judith Butler (1991) argues, “Identity categories tend to be instruments of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (p. 13-14).

Lesbians and gay men have become an effective political force in the West by organizing around a particular collective identity. Utilizing strategies similar to the civil rights movement, the gay and lesbian rights movement and lesbian feminism have both established a quasi-ethnicity, complete with political and social institutions (Gamson, 1995). Underlying this is an assumption of sameness, a belief that despite diversity, lesbians (or gay men) share the same fixed essence. In this essentialist politic, stable notions of identity, both individual and collective, have been the foundation for political organizing and community building (Cohen, 1991; Taylor and Rupp, 1993).

Queer theory has challenged the essentialist politics of the mainstream gay and lesbian rights movement, asserting that political gains have been made by relying on (and enforcing) exclusive and narrow definitions of identity (Jagose, 1996; Butler, 1991;
Phelan, 1994; Fuss, 1991). The reformist agenda aims to secure equal rights for gays and lesbians through legislative and policy change. However, this agenda relies on the same systems that organize and regulate gender and sexuality, profiting from the definition of these categories as fixed, biological givens. Queer theory has disputed this strategy, arguing that it both leaves oppressive foundations intact and that it excludes many who live outside the narrow definitions of the dominant sexual minority, particularly transgendered people, femme/butch lesbians, queers of colour and Two Spirited people (Storr, 1997; Nestle, 1992; Califia, 1997; Namaste, 1994, 1996).

While queer theory provides some useful analytical tools for the purpose of this project, it also generates important questions. Although “queer” has become synonymous with inclusivity (and is often substituted for the cumbersome “lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community”), some scholars and activists have contested this equation. Oppositional discourses, like hegemonic ones, privilege certain subjectivities; queer theory has been seen to reproduce dominant hierarchies and ignore the relationship between race, gender and sexuality (Storr, 1997; Beemyn and Eliason, 1996; Moya, 1997). Queer theory has also been critiqued for its lack of intelligibility.

So, what good is queer for political purposes? Much political organizing has relied on coherent notions of identity. When this is disrupted, engagement in social activism must be spurred by something other than a shared sense of marginalization. Jagose (1996) has argued that the queer has potential for celebrating the fluidity of identity and for working in coalitions. Other scholars (Phelan, 1994) have debated the political usefulness of queer for political mobilization.
Identity Politics Meets Postmodernism and Queer Theory: Strategic Essentialism

While queer and constructionist theories have informed much of my thinking about lesbian activism, I have found these theories to be, individually, inadequate for explicating the ambiguous relationships between identity, community and activism. While theoretically helpful, discursive postmodern gestures that highlight the fluidity of identities have not always manifested in a connection with the material realities of people's lives (Namaste, 1996; Moya, 1997). Challenging identity politics as being based on either/or binaries, queer and postmodern theories themselves establish a dichotomous split between fixed identities (such as gay and lesbian) and amorphous, shifting categories such as “queer”. While a critique of essentialism is certainly in order, constructionist theories have done this without recognizing the importance of identity in daily life.

Spivak (1990) argues for an integrated theoretical framework, where the value of communal identities and institutions is recognized and where we acknowledge exclusions and domination within lesbian communities. A theory of “strategic essentialism” (p. 11) is proposed, where we accept the provisionality of identities as well as their daily solidity in the relations of power. Strategic essentialism sees that identities are useful and meaningful and that in both political organizing and personal lives, identities are adopted because they make sense in the moment. However, we often become invested in the identity as who we are, forgetting that identities are not definitive or everlasting.

There are moments when it might be strategically necessary to insist that there is such a thing as an essential lesbian experience, even though we may not believe it to be true. The “necessary fiction” (Hall, 1992, p. 254) of essential lesbian identity parallels
that of race. Though acknowledging the constructed character of race illuminates why communities of colour struggle for unity, it simultaneously can undermine critiques of racism: if there is no such thing as race, conservatives can assert the non-existence of racist oppression (Phelan, 1994, p. 29). Strategic essentialism means maintaining the tension between supporting diversity within communities and acknowledging how systems organize and marginalize similarly.

A number of scholars have debated whether a coherent subject is requisite for political organizing (Phelan, 1994; Butler, 1992; Grewal, 1994). As Butler has argued (1992), how one thinks about identity, both collective and individual, shapes both the form and content of one’s political strategy. While postmodern notions of the subject are insightful, they deconstruct identity without honouring the meanings identities have for marginalized groups and the functions of identity in mobilizing for social change. It is helpful to quote Zoe Newman’s (1997) study of a Jewish feminist activist group at length:

They [identities] allow us to stake claims; they provide a sense of belonging; they facilitate finding allies, in a world where enemies are common; they are a rallying point; they provide a sense of purpose and a language to a set of experiences, which can then be argued as political, not merely personal. Identities are useful and even necessary in the face of adversity (p. 16).

Newman goes on to say:

Identity is a narrowing, a categorizing, a limiting of possibility; it provides a facile analysis of complex situations; it creates easy divisions for conflict; it artificially promises similarity, safety; identity encourages the search for sameness and resistance to difference; it rests on conception of people as autonomous individuals; it is only in response to an organizing system which categorizes to dominate; it sanctifies (certain) ‘experience’ within the narrative of identity; identity is embedded in the binary of me/not me. And yet identity also enables (p. 16-17).
It is this tension that I attempt to honour in this thesis; the constraints that come with claiming identity as well as the space of possibilities that identity creates for a small group of lesbian activists; the solidarity and companionship that is (or can be) community as well as the pain and disillusionment of this idealistic vision.
Chapter 3:

Disrupting the Researcher/Participant Dichotomy: Methodological Considerations

Telling the Tale: Narrative Research Methodology

Two or three things I know, two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that to go on living I have to tell stories, that stories are the one sure way I know to touch the heart and change the world (Allison, 1995, p. 72)

In order to address the paucity of research on the impact of lesbian identity and activism on health, I wanted to record the stories that women in my network shared with me as well as explore my own understandings of this relationship. I embarked on a process that included a number of research methods: 7 individual interviews (6 participants and myself), a focus group and a process of note taking to record my own thoughts and feelings as the research progressed.

In developing my research plan, I took for granted that I would use a qualitative approach. I felt that qualitative research could capture the complex and nuanced relationship between lesbian identity, health and politicization. Many times, over coffee, at dinner parties, at work, I heard lesbians talking about "pride", about the benefits and drawbacks of "community", about the relationship between activism and well-being, yet I didn't see this reflected in the literature on lesbian health. I believed that interviewing would be an opportunity to make visible knowledge that had been marginalized and ignored in the dominant health and social movement discourses.
Subjugated Knowledges

Other lesbian researchers have used narrative methods to examine lesbian history and to celebrate knowledge that has been hitherto invisible and undervalued (Kennedy and Davis, 1993/1994; Ross, 1995; Krieger, 1983). This methodology recognizes that while narratives are used by dominant groups to speak about the Other, they are also the method by which those on the margins construct their history and represent themselves (Nespor and Barber, 1995).

Knowledge is a story that is told, metaphor and symbolism more than fact. Narratives or stories are a part of the construction of knowledge, although the relationship between stories, knowledge and truth is often obscured. As Sherene Razack (1993) states, "In the context of social change story-telling refers to an opposition to established knowledge, to Foucault's suppressed knowledge, to the experiences of the world that are not admitted into dominant knowledge paradigms" (p. 55).

I felt that interviewing would provide a space to theorize, both individually and collectively, about issues activists rarely have the time to think about and discuss. Throughout my own involvement in feminist organizing, I have often reflected on the relationship between identity and activism. However, there have been limited opportunities to debate and discuss this with others. So often the focus is on getting the work done, as many activists participate in projects while juggling family and work responsibilities. During the interviews, a number of participants articulated that it was a "luxury", an "indulgence" to theorize about the relationship between identity, activism and well-being in their own lives.
Negotiating the Risks

We are learning to depend more and more on our own sources for survival, learning not to let the weight of this burden, the bridge, break our backs. Haven’t we always borne jugs of water, children, poverty? Why not learn to bear baskets of hope, love, self-nourishment and to step lightly? (Anzaldúa, 193, Foreword).

I approached this project with trepidation for a number of reasons. While it was important for me to look at the silence around lesbian resiliency and well-being, I was aware that this focus may not advance the political agenda of equity. Working with systems that exclude and pathologize lesbians, advocating for change has necessitated locating ourselves in a place of marginalization, obscuring our strength and resilience, and minimizing our personal and community resources. Highlighting the positive aspects of lesbian identity and the benefits of activism could be seen to detract attention from the material reality of systemic oppressions.

I was also aware that examining the complex experiences of lesbian activists, particularly the issues around “trashing” in women’s communities, might be seen as airing the family’s dirty laundry. As Becki Ross (1995) notes, “documenting experiences of alienation, extreme disappointment, and the loss of self internal to lesbian-feminist communities may be seen to undermine the ideologically preferred image of these communities as open, stable and conflict-free” (p. 19). In a historical period where we are witnessing conservative backlash against equality-seeking groups, exposing cracks in the armour may be politically dangerous.

Despite my apprehension that this project could be seen as undermining the equity-seeking work of lesbian activists, I felt it was important to articulate and record the interconnection between identity, activism and well-being in the lives of a small group of women. My motivation stemmed from a desire to challenge the discourse of
lesbian identity as solely about marginalization and our relationship to systems as only about barriers. I wanted to explore the positive aspects of lesbian identity and to talk about the power of resistance in shaping lives. I wanted to illustrate a complex image of lesbians that I saw daily, and lived, an image that was not reflected in either academic literature or popular representations.

Situated Knowledges

The feminist critique of positivism and rejection of value neutral science has led many researchers to think critically about the value of subjectivity and reflexivity in research. This was at the forefront of my mind as I embarked upon my research. I was aware that conducting research within my own network and rupturing the researcher/researched dichotomy by being interviewed as a participant myself would require vigilance and commitment to critical self-reflection. It would demand that I placed myself within the research and made my presence known.

Donna Haraway’s (1991) work on the “politics and epistemology of location” (p. 195) provides a framework for thinking about “situated knowledges” where location (historical, national) and positioning (race, class, gender, sexuality) inform knowledge production (p. 111). Conceiving of perspectives as partial moves beyond the insider/outsider split and acknowledges that many researchers inhabit both (and other) locations simultaneously.

In this chapter, I explicate the methodology I used, from selecting participants through to data analysis and writing. As I was both participant and researcher, I explore the challenges that this dual role presented and the benefits of such a strategy. I also highlight the relationship between my theoretical framework and my methodology,
making the links between the more philosophical orientation of the thesis and the practicalities of conducting research from the inside.

**The Participants: Selection Criteria**

The criteria I used to select participants was deceptively simple. I wanted to talk to women who identified as lesbians and had been involved in activism. Activism was broadly defined as paid or unpaid work within social justice or feminist organizations/grassroots coalitions, community-based research or education for social change or macro-focused advocacy work, such as policy development and change in the government. As I was focusing on my existing network and had limited time and funding, I only interviewed participants from the Vancouver area.

All six participants identified as lesbian, although they also used other identifiers: two of them identified as femme, two as butch, one used queer to define herself and one other woman used queer interchangeably with “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender” when talking about issues in the “queer community.” Four used dyke interchangeably with lesbian. Three participants were women of colour, one was Jewish, and two identified as white. The class background of many of the participants was mixed; half of the participants came from working-class backgrounds, a few identified as middle-class and a few came from mixed-class backgrounds. Their ages ranged from thirty to mid-fifties. All of the participants have long histories of political work, whether feminist, anti-racist, environmental, or queer rights, and all were presently involved in some capacity with social justice projects.

I was aware that selecting participants within my own circle would be limiting. For example, I did not interview any women under the age of 30. I also recognize that I
only interviewed women who identified as lesbians, not bisexual or transgendered women. In talking about my research with other community-based researchers, I have been asked repeatedly why I chose this focus and why I made this distinction, instead of using the catchall term “queer”. There are a number of reasons, some practical and others more theoretical.

First, I focused specifically on lesbian activists because there is a particular history of lesbian activism and culture within many social movements (Taylor and Rupp, 1993; Ross, 1995) and I wanted to place my research within that historical context. This is not to argue that this history has been unproblematic; many writers have articulated the silencing and exclusion that lesbian feminist organizing has perpetuated (Chrystos, 1983; Moraga, 1983; Khan, 1999). I felt that situating my study within the historical context of lesbian feminist organizing, without shying away from the issue of power and oppression within lesbian communities, would enable a more thorough investigation. I also wanted to address the silences within the literature on lesbian health and illuminate the impact of activism on women’s health.

More philosophically, I questioned the correlation between queer and inclusivity. In queer studies, there has been much work around disrupting essentialist notions of identity (Butler, 1991; Cohen, 1991; Wittig, 1995) and challenging the exclusion of transgendered and bisexual people from political organizing within the larger gay and lesbian rights movement (Jagose, 1996; Califia, 1997; Storr, 1997; Feinberg, 1999). Both of these projects are worthwhile. However, I feel that focusing on “queer” can obscure the very real differences that exist between communities. This is not to assert that there
is uniformity within lesbian communities but to disrupt the equation of specificity with essentialism.

In the majority of research studies on lesbian identity, the participants have been overwhelmingly white, middle class, able-bodied urban women (Green, 1997; Alarcón, 1990; Khan, 1999; McMichael and Wallace, 1999; Penelope, 1994; Shah, 1993). I was aware of not wanting to replicate the exclusion of women of colour, aboriginal women, women living with disabilities and working-class women in my study. In some ways, my selection process was organic, as the study participants came from a pre-existing circle of people. I was aware that there were no aboriginal women nor women living with disabilities involved in my study. However, I was conscious of not seeking out women to fit these criteria, the “tick off the box” method of participant selection (Holmes, 2000).

The Interviews

The interviews and focus group were tape recorded and transcribed. All of them were conducted in person, in the homes of the participants or at my house and lasted approximately an hour and a half. The first interview had to be redone due to technical problems with the tape recorder. Prior to the interviews, I talked at length with almost all of the participants about the project. The majority of the participants had already been aware of my research through our personal connections. Like Frankenberg (1993), I didn’t believe in protecting the (supposed) unknowing innocence of the participants by withholding information about the research goals or camouflaging my analysis of the issues. To do so would have been seemed particularly false, as well as unethical, given my friendships with a number of the participants.
I interviewed 6 women as well as being interviewed myself. I felt that it was important to be interviewed myself to make my role as a participant in the project more visible. Had I not been interviewed, my insider status (as a lesbian, an activist, and friend/colleague to the participants) would have remained hidden. It would have enabled me to maintain a false (safe?) distance and to create a barrier between researcher and participant that didn’t really exist; although I had some anxiety about being interviewed, I felt the need to make my presence explicit.

I was interviewed by a woman who was otherwise not involved in this research project. In thinking about the criterion for the person to interview me, I looked for someone who would understand the issues I was examining; I wanted to speak as freely as I could, and felt that having some common experience and understandings would facilitate this. I chose a woman who identifies as a lesbian, and who comes from a mixed heritage, mixed class background. She has a substantial history of involvement in social justice work but is no longer active in political organizing. In retrospect, I feel sure that our commonalities enabled me to speak about things that are difficult and painful, particularly the ambiguities and invisibility (as well as the joys) of my mixed heritage.

I developed questions for both the individual interviews and the focus group and loosely followed these as a guide. Although I asked the same questions of each participant, there were significant differences in the interviews. As the interviews were quite informal, I asked many non-scripted questions as the narratives unfolded, in some cases to get clarification or to probe more deeply and in others, to pursue directions opened up by the participants’ narratives.
Initially, I debated whether it would be more fruitful to conduct the individual interviews before or after the focus group. I wondered whether holding the group first would be a catalyst for the individual interviews, with questions being generated from the group discussion. I was also curious about whether starting with the group would inhibit participants and stifle conversation. In the end, I interviewed women individually first, focusing on their personal histories and experiences and providing them with a forum to discuss anything they might not feel comfortable sharing in the focus group.

Structuring the research as I did provided me with the opportunity to get feedback on my preliminary analysis. In preparing the guide for group discussion, I framed a number of the questions around common themes from the individual interviews. Although I opened up the group discussion asking for feedback, I was unprepared for the level of dissension around my initial findings. Several of the participants disputed my analysis of their stories, and there was much lively discussion about what the participants “really meant”. Generating the discussion questions around my preliminary interpretations was vital to the development of my understandings; without having done so, I may have proceeded in a direction that the participants had never intended me to go.

**Friend or Participant? Conducting Research Close to Home**

When I met with participants to conduct the interviews, we inevitably visited for a substantial amount of time before beginning the interview. The process of “catching up” with the participants organically moved towards involvement in community initiatives as we swapped stories of our latest projects. This made it difficult to know when to begin the interview proper. Occasionally, I felt that I was trying to direct the conversation or find an opening where I could introduce the research and “officially” start the interview.
The sense of awkwardness that I felt has been documented by Cotteril (1992) in her study on friendship and vulnerability in the interviewing process: "There is always a momentary juncture between informal talk and the formal interview, but this tended to be more pronounced and embarrassing with friends" (p. 597).

Undertaking a study looking at issues among my own network was methodologically challenging. Most research methodologies assume a distance between researcher and researched and offer few insights into negotiating the relationship when it is close to home. So how did my prior relationship with the participants influence the interviews?

One of the concerns raised in qualitative methodology literature is the fear that study participants will only say what the researcher wants to hear (Cotteril, 1992). At the outset of my research, I believed (perhaps naively) that my connections with the participants would yield "authentic" responses. However, over the course of the project, I began to realize that my friendships with the interviewees might shape their responses; the participants' knowledge of me might aid them in discerning what the "right" answer was. As the researcher, I too felt concerned with saying and doing the right thing during the research process. I was all too aware that many of my respondents had more experience than I in qualitative research (most of it outside the academy) and I was concerned that I might demonstrate a lack of experience or skill.

In analyzing the transcripts from the interviews, I was struck by how many of the participants asked me questions about my own experiences and welcomed my involvement in the interview. Often, the women would say "you know how it is" or "right?" drawing on their knowledge (or assumption) of our shared experience. In the
interviews with women of colour, there were several instances where the participants expressed a belief that my mixed heritage would give me insight into what they were saying. In Cotteril’s study (1992) on researching among friendship networks, she states: “If the researcher volunteers information about herself unasked, this may be seen as an unwelcome contribution and not part of the research contract” (p. 596). This was not my experience.

However, I did worry about the impact of offering insights of my own in the interviews, fearing that I would taint the response of the participants or sway them from their own, “real” perspectives. I realize in retrospect that my anxiety stemmed from my socialization in positivist social science methodologies and that these beliefs contradicted my stated theoretical framework. Although I was committed to challenging notions of the researcher as detached and objective and the participants as pure, authentic and knowable subjects, these epistemological understandings were deeply embedded in my consciousness. Often, I was unable to articulate or explain my unease with the familiarity and friendliness of the interview process. In retrospect, I recognized my discomfort stemmed from the dissonance between my stated theoretical framework and my ingrained assumptions about the proper or appropriate way to conduct a research project.

My relationships with participants also affected my emotional experience of the interviews. There were a few times when the participants were obviously pained by the conversation. At these junctures, I felt unable to direct my questioning to greater depth for fear of causing them further distress. I identified strongly with their feeling of being judged by other women and with the frustrations they experienced working in social justice movements. A few times, I was unable to control my emotional response and I
cried with the participants. Cotteril’s article (1992), one of a few written on friendship in qualitative research, offers little guidance for dealing with this and falls back on assumptions of distance between researcher and researched: “... So what is her [the researcher’s] role? It seems to me that it can only be that of a sympathetic listener, for it is highly unlikely that she can actually share the woman’s experience” (p. 598).

I did not feel that the participants were confusing the research with therapy, as some scholars writing on this issue have argued (Cotteril, 1992). I believe that issues of resistance and identity are emotionally laden, and trying to separate feeling from personal narratives or collective theorizing is impossible. Analyzing participants’ emotional response to interview questions as “therapy” illuminates a reliance on the simplistic dualism of positivist research paradigms and ignores the value of storytelling for both personal and social transformation (Emihovich, 1995; Grumet, 1991; Kennedy and Davis, 1996; Razack, 1993). During the interviews, the participants’ intense emotional responses often coincided with powerful insights and realizations about the relationship between activism, health and identity. It seemed that for a number of participants, telling their stories surfaced strong emotions and memories that assisted them in theorizing about the nature of activism. As one participant said, “It’s funny, um... talking about it like this... I feel stupid for crying, but I think it’s helping me connect the dots.”

The Focus Group

Although I was excited about holding the focus group, I was concerned about my roles as participant, researcher, and facilitator. My experience negotiating multiple locations is that it is difficult to stay grounded in each of them and not have one become dominant. I was also nervous about bringing the group together, despite the connections
that existed between the participants prior to my research. However, my trepidation was balanced by my belief that groups provide an opportunity for collective reflection and theorizing as well as consciousness raising and personal change.

I thought that the focus group would be an opportunity to look in depth at common themes from the interviews, to explore more “theoretical” pieces from the literature I had read, and to critically reflect on notions of collective identity. In addition, I used the focus group to generate feedback on my preliminary interpretations of data from the interviews.

The focus group was held after a dinner for the participants at my home and lasted approximately 3 hours. One woman did not participate in the focus group because of personal reasons. We spent most of the meal catching up on each other’s lives and discussing the recent Angela Davis lecture held in Vancouver. All of the participants knew one another in some capacity; some had long histories of working together and well-established friendships and some knew each other only by association. This familiarity made it seem more like a dinner party with a group of friends and made it awkward for me to shift the discussion to my research.

Prior to the focus group, I had debated about how to begin the discussion. Although I felt that it was proper protocol to begin with establishing group agreements, I thought that to do so would seem patronizing to the participants, all of whom had signed a confidentiality agreement and understood confidentiality issues from their own experience (as researchers or participants) in other community-based research projects. Instead, I introduced the approach that I hoped to take in the group: exploring common themes from the individual interviews, discussing my preliminary analysis and examining
some of the theoretical literature on lesbian identity and community. During my introduction, the group was quiet and the participants seemed slightly uncomfortable. It was a marked contrast to the lively discussion and laughter during dinner, and I was very aware of my transition from friend and colleague to researcher.

After the initial awkwardness of my preamble, the focus group was boisterous and interactive, with the women participating more or less equally. One of the striking things about the group was the loud and frequent laughter and the (apparent) common understandings, evident in the sharing of “in jokes” and the repeated “yeah, I know what you mean”.

Silences

Despite the shared experiences of the participants, I was also aware of silences and gaps in what the participants shared in the group discussion, both from the individual interviews and from my personal knowledge of some of the participants. Most notable was the limited discussion of race, despite the presence of women of colour, the anti-racist work done by many of the participants and the repeated references to the lecture by Angela Davis. It wasn’t that race was never mentioned; however, it was not central to the discussion as it had been in the individual interviews I conducted with both the women of colour and the white women. The impacts of racism and the power of white privilege were downplayed in the group discussion, despite one white woman talking about how whiteness is centred in lesbian communities and political organizing.

I can only assume that there were issues of safety around race that were not addressed and that this accounted for the relative silence on the topic. I felt some apprehension about probing the issue as I felt unable to frame it in a way that would
open, rather than shut down, the discussion. In this case, I felt that my pre-existing friendships with the participants, and consequent fear of group conflict, limited my ability to name what I was witnessing. This will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

Confidentiality

All of the participants signed a confidentiality agreement prior to the interviews. Most research in lesbian communities has assumed the need for pseudonyms and elaborate mechanisms to camouflage the identities of participants (Ross, 1995). This sensitivity, common practice in qualitative research, is seen to be more important in sexual minority communities because of the societal stigma of queer identities (Kennedy and Davis, 1996).

Some of the participants in this project were initially ambivalent about the use of pseudonyms, and a number of them discussed the importance of being out and visible even in the context of this study. A few of the participants felt that they were public figures, in a sense, and that their lives as activists were already subject to a certain level of scrutiny. This reflected a belief about who the audience of this thesis would be: other lesbian activists who, regardless of pseudonyms, might be able to identify the participants, or academics far removed from their daily lives. One participant (the woman who did not attend the focus group) voiced concerns about confidentiality, both within the lesbian community in Vancouver and in her country of origin. In the end, some of the participants opted to use pseudonyms (of their choosing) while others asked to be represented by their real first names.

Feminist researchers have articulated the ethical dilemmas that may arise when the researcher translates the participants’ personal information into data (Stacey, 1996;
Emihovich, 1995; Nespor and Barber, 1995). Throughout this project I have worried that my familiarity with the women I interviewed might result in feelings of betrayal when their narrative accounts become set as text. To alleviate my fears, I provided a number of opportunities for participants to review their narratives and my interpretations.

All participants were given a transcript of their individual interview and asked to provide feedback and make any changes to the record. I also gave the participants an opportunity to read a draft of the thesis. None of them felt that they had time to read the whole thesis, so I offered to provide copies of the selected quotes. Only two women edited their transcripts, one of them noting things she did not want included in the final thesis. One other participant made comments during the interview about what she would like deleted (as in “this part is off the record”).

Although the other participants did not use the opportunity to make changes to the transcripts, I felt sure that they expected me to leave out identifying information and pieces of their biographies from the final draft of my thesis. This was particularly true about health and relationship information that the participants shared during the interview. Although I was not asked expressly to delete these pieces from the transcripts, I assumed (based on knowledge gained through my personal connection to the participants) that this information was not for public consumption. It seemed likely that the participants, by virtue of our friendship, made assumptions that I would intuitively know what to exclude from the written record.

However, as I neared completing a first draft, I contacted the participants to ask more specific questions about the inclusion of personal information. To my surprise, the information that I had expected would be off the record was felt by the participants to be
a key piece of the data. I was encouraged to provide a more “truthful” representation than I had expected to.

**Data Analysis**

I used a number of different approaches to analyzing the data from the interviews and focus group. The most useful was looking at the data in terms of repetitive themes and/or words. I read the transcripts over and over again, using colour and diagrams to highlight common and divergent themes, and to make the links between issues (Kirby and McKenna, 1989). My analysis of what the central issues were changed a number of times, and as I pulled apart more threads, my analysis deepened and became more complex.

When I began to write, I found myself struggling to analyze the themes and hesitating to interpret the words of the participants. Doing so seemed somehow arrogant, like I was asserting some greater knowing than the participants themselves. In retrospect, my struggle was tied to the closeness I felt to the participants; I’m sure I would have been less hesitant to analyze the words of strangers, given the (relative) lack of risk that distance brings.

**The Writing Process**

I sat down to write with some anxiety. Conducting the research within my own network was different than writing about it. After collecting data, researchers are still faced with issues of representation and narrative authority. What does this mean for the writing process, especially when the research was within my own circle, where there
exists a friendly, seemingly “equal” research relationship? When I sat down to write, I was aware that the rights of interpretation and description were firmly in my hands.

Traditionally, narrative accounts have flowed through a “cascade of re-representation” (Latour, quoted in Nespor and Barber, 1996, p. 50), moving through a series of analyses and reconstructions that eventually move them further from the people who participated in their making. Some researchers have tried to remedy this, developing strategies to share the work of interpretation and writing such as co-authoring the text with participants and sharing book royalties (Wolf, 1996). However, it is questionable whether these attempts at collaboration eliminate the problem of narrative authority or merely obscure the power of the researcher in weaving the text.

I offered the opportunity to the participants to preview a draft of the thesis and provide their comments. None of them felt that they had time to read the whole document before my deadline and a few articulated that they “trusted me” to “portray things accurately”. Three of the participants took me up on the offer to look at the quotes I was using with the understanding that they could decline the inclusion of their words.

I did not want to camouflage my role in the project of writing but wanted to remain accountable to the words and lives of the participants. Analyzing and writing about my own experiences and those of women close to me made me hyper-vigilant about my interpretations. I was aware that many of our conversations were tentative explorations of things we hadn’t necessarily talked or theorized about before. Numerous times during the interviews, participants stated that their understandings were shifting or that they hadn’t thought about their experiences in this way before. I worried that writing would fix our words, masking the partial and contingent nature of our statements. While
we may think simplistically about stories as having a tidy resolution, narratives about social change are often messy and ambiguous: “Instead of having end points, such narratives describe situations as portions of complex journeys that continue to unfold. Their incompleteness and contingency is critical to their meaning” (Nespor and Barber, 1995, p. 60).

The quotes represented here do not represent all of the issues or perspectives of the participants. When choosing quotes to illustrate the research themes, I tried to include responses from each participant equally. However, one participant was unwell on the day of our interview; thus, her comments were quite brief, making it challenging to represent her perspective equally. There were a number of sub-themes that emerged from the research but in the interest of conciseness, I was unable to incorporate them into the final analysis. I struggled to determine what was relevant, and more importantly, what was relevant to whom; was I writing for the women whose stories I listened to? For other activists? For my thesis committee? Eventually, my selection of themes was determined by how they spoke to my original questions, whether that speaking defied my vision or affirmed it.

Self Reflexivity

Self-reflexivity was a central concern for me throughout this project. As a starting point, I was guided by a belief that critical self-reflection is central to doing qualitative research. Secondarily, conducting the research close to home made my process much more complex and I felt that instituting a process for critical reflection would both provide insight into my thoughts and feelings about the research and would
generate another level of data. I had lengthy internal debates about which tools might best capture this: a written journal, an audio diary, something more visual like a series of drawings. In the end, I had to acknowledge that I have never been “successful” at journaling consistently, and that I couldn’t imagine translating my thoughts and feelings about activism and identity into art. I had to find something that fit with my linear way of thinking yet would allow me to express my struggles with the research process, my difficulty with integrating diverse theoretical writings and my ambivalence about conducting research among my friends and colleagues.

Eventually, I decided to have structured writing time at key points in the research process: before and after each interview and the focus group, and after milestones like finishing transcription, submitting drafts to my committee etc. Predictably, I also ended up writing in a more spontaneous way, when I needed an outlet to vent my frustration and anxiety or when I was struggling with particularly difficult issues (like doing “data analysis” on the very personal, and sometimes highly emotional narratives of people close to me). A few times, I wrote about epiphanies and moments of self-awareness that I came to in the course of reading or talking to other people about my research.

Before I sat down to write my thesis, I struggled over whether to include notes from my research journal in the final document. In the end, I decided not to incorporate verbatim quotes but to have the notes inform my data analysis and writing, particularly around methodological considerations. In part, this decision was based on my own need for confidentiality, my desire to keep some personal aspects of the research experience to myself. My decision to exclude verbatim quotes was also an attempt to strike a balance; while I wanted my voice to come through in the thesis, I didn’t want my narrative, either
the formal one I told in the interview or the subtextual one represented by my journal notes, to dominate.

The downside of excluding my notes is that it prevents the reader from witnessing (all of) the intimate struggle that comes with doing research from within. Throughout this project, I have often struggled with my place as researcher, participant, and friend/peer to the participants; Instead of looking at it as juggling multiple roles, I have tried to see myself in a more integrated way. However, I often found myself falling back on notions of the researcher as outside, as somehow disassociated from the process of producing knowledge. I found this tendency to place myself outside most evident when I was writing; As I wrote about the themes that emerged from the interviews (including my own), I tended to use phrases such as “their stories” or “they said”. When I was nearing completion, I went through the entire manuscript looking for places where I used these words, recognizing that doing so unconsciously camouflaged my presence.
Chapter 4

The Quest for Integration: Problematizing Notions of Identity and Community

In this chapter and the next, I turn to the interviews and focus group, examining the discourses that circulated in discussion with the study participants. Chapter Four looks at the focus group and the individual interviews, highlighting the places where the participants both defied and utilized the dominant doctrines of lesbian feminist organizing. At times they employed the hegemonic discourse of lesbian activist communities as ideologically homogenous, nurturing and utopian environments. At other moments, they complicated this image with stories of shattered expectations, extreme disillusionment and realizations of difference.

There were a number of key themes that came out of the individual interviews and focus group, themes that centred on the participants' repudiation, acceptance and reinterpretation of dominant discourses. In individual interviews I asked about the participant's history of political involvement, their definitions of activism, and the links between their coming out as lesbians and their political education. We talked about the expectations of fellow organizers ("giving it all for the cause") and how this related to burnout and physical illness. We discussed how, despite the drawbacks, activism seemed a seamless, organic and inescapable part of our lives. In an attempt to look at more sustainable strategies for organizing, I also asked about what fuels organizers in doing political work and what keeps them going. In the focus group, we considered the concept of marginality as resistance, theorized about the political potential of "queer" movements,
discussed notions of “home” and “family” in organizing and explored the therapeutic nature of activism.

Marginality as Resistance: From Politicization to Activism

...what it [politicization] means is...those moments of knowing...when you read the books that are articulating it, that’s when you understand. You understand from those places of knowing, right? So... it’s not like “Oh, I didn’t know”... it’s like “Ahhhh... it all makes sense”. So for like people who have been part of the privileged class and group here...it’s...“Oh, I didn’t know”. Me, it’s more like “Ahhhh, it fuckin’ makes sense now”. Like, this is it (Mala, individual interview).

The bio-deterministic discourses of the sexologists have shaped the development of contemporary lesbian identities and communities; one of the ways that hegemonic power relations are maintained is by controlling the representations of subordinate groups. While dominant representations of lesbians as diseased and unnatural have been refuted by many lesbians (Kleindiest, 1999) and cunningly played with by others (Nestle, 1992), our understandings of ourselves are still shaped by prevailing cultural categories and assumptions. As Shane Phelan (1994) argues,

Contemporary lesbian identities are the product of medicine, of heterosexist popular culture and media, religion, of semi-autonomous lesbian subcultures, and of lesbian involvement with and resistance to both gay male and heterosexual feminist ideas and practices (p. 91).

Throughout the 20th century, naming ourselves and creating positive representations has been central to the work of many lesbian activists and artists (Kleindienst, 1999). This recreation has relied on essentialist logic to claim an identifiable lesbian identity, to create a mythologized lesbian community and a sustaining, yet fictional, sense of commonality. For some lesbians, the attraction of identity politics has been the provision of a positive lesbian identity, a sense of home, a
visible and distinct culture, a sense of belonging. bell hooks (1990) has written about “homeplace”, a place where she, as a black child, was nurtured, sustained and offered protection from white supremacist structures. hooks identifies this function of “homeplace” as a manifestation of political resistance, albeit one that often goes unrecognized..

As I embarked on this project, I made some assumptions about the relationship between being politicized and doing activist work. In retrospect, I think I naively believed them to be one and the same, without really pulling apart the threads of the connection. I failed to recognize that in some ways, they are distinct, although related. As Anne noted in her interview, politicization is about consciousness, where personal experience connects with a larger political perspective while activism is a deliberate, often public, act of resistance.

Over the course of the interviews, the participants talked about their coming to political awareness, noting significant events that gave them insight into societal power relations and connected them with their own experience of oppressions. As Nen said, “It [political consciousness] gives me a sense of awareness of how the world works. And it gives me some explanations and options for understanding the situation of oppression” (individual interview). All of the participants identified this as a necessary precursor to political action. For the participants, politicization was somehow connected to personal experiences of being Other, to their own sense of marginalization. This Outsider status was, for many, the starting point for the development of oppositional consciousness and eventually, for political mobilization and action:

...in a way, all of us have felt that experience [of being Other] as part of what takes us to whatever it is, whatever motivates us to what we do, but at the same
time, I...think that Otherness has huge benefits, in that you can see the world from a lens that most people aren’t able to see. So, actually we are a benefit to society because we [marginalized groups] can be critical of it in a way that most people can’t, people who are totally seamlessly part of it (Da, focus group).

Coming to an awareness of their own oppression, and how this was linked to the struggles of others, was central to getting involved in activist work. As Mala remarked when I asked her about her involvement in social justice work, “Social justice is such an interesting word. I mean, this is about my life, this is about my life” (individual interview, emphasis hers). Most often, it seemed that there were significant events that encouraged them to understand their own “personal feelings of oddness” (Da, individual interview) in a macro-structural way. In talking about her involvement in the early women’s shelter movement in England, Da spoke of feeling:

at home, which is not articulated at all... partly because everything was a little outlaw... the sense of it all was like...we were on the margins. And maybe that was the first time where my...feeling of being a marginalized person...connected with other forms of marginalization. ...I hadn’t known before that I felt that, just knew that there was a sense of discomfort (Da, individual interview).

For a number of the participants, oppositional consciousness was rooted in historical and familial experiences of oppression, particularly colonialism and anti-Semitism. Mala talked about how becoming politicized came from her connection to the historical legacy of the slavery:

Everything comes from who we are, and how far back we can remember who we are. ...I’ve been lucky to...touch my great grandmother, and in touching her at 110, I’m touching her father who was a slave, you know. I touch those histories (Mala, individual interview).

Later in the interview, Mala talked about the importance of memory, both collective and individual, in creating political consciousness. She used the example of the arrival of Chinese migrants on the shores of the Northwest coast in the summer of
1999 and the parallels with the migration of Haitian people on the east coast of North America:

I know that story, 'cause that's my own people's story crossing water... I think a lot of people, white people, who haven't had a lot of upheaval, or who have had a lot of amnesia around upheaval... like white people crossing over to this land. There's a whole other theory I have about what they were running from or being kicked out and that trauma... you know. If you have that amnesia, well then, I guess things that are happening around here, maybe they don't really trouble you too much (Mala, individual interview).

While the participants talked about politicization as an individual awakening, they acknowledged the importance of outside influences as catalysts for personal and political transformation. Often, this consciousness developed through women's studies courses or through exposure to the writings of lesbian feminist theorists such as Audre Lorde and Cherrie Moraga. Indeed, several of the participants specifically mentioned the edited collection *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour* (1993) as a significant contributor to their analysis around race, class and sexuality.

Challenging encounters with other women were also key points in the participants developing oppositional consciousness. For Chris, a workshop by a feminist liberation theologian provided a springboard for personal and political change:

There were a couple of women from the US that came down to Chile. They used to come down maybe every couple years to do workshops and stuff like that for us and one of these early workshops, one of these women was clearly a lesbian and she was a Roman Catholic theologian and she identified as a lesbian. She was very open and very public about it and that was the first time I ever had that kind of person, like there was a real person there that said in a very public way that she was a lesbian and seemed very normal. Like, for her it seemed very normal... This made a really big impact on me, in terms of her and her whole thing. In the course of doing the workshops with us, she was very open and we looked at a lot of stuff about the hierarchy of women in relation to patriarchy and who was on the bottom, and on the bottom were the nuns and the lesbians, right? Because both are inaccessible to men (Chris, individual interview).
The workshop facilitator provided a positive image of lesbian sexuality as well as challenging the dominant discourse within the Church, both of which spoke to Chris' experience of being oppressed as a woman, and as a lesbian.

Talking about marginality as resistance can have the effects of reifying the inside/outside dichotomy and romanticizing the margin. The relationship between margin and centre was a key theme in my interview with Anne, who spoke in both her individual interview and in the focus group about her embodiment of both oppression and privilege. She noted the difficulties of seeing oppression as interlocking when we come together to organize around our identities as lesbians as this turns our gaze only to where we are oppressed as lesbians, not to where we might hold privilege as white, middle class, able bodied.

The participants talked about the relationship between margin and centre in their lives. In the focus group, we discussed our struggles to come to terms with our own experiences of marginality and how this enabled us to “engage more authentically” (Chris, focus group) with others. This was central to our processes of moving from shame to pride and becoming “comfortable” with our identities. Anne talked about this as acknowledging the “gifts and challenges” of the different parts of our selves:

‘Cause I know there’s a way that, having done the work that I do... having done that work but also knowing that I’ve been protected by my class and protected by my education, I don’t experience the horrible experiences of oppression of being a lesbian that I used to (Anne, focus group).

**Coming out, Coming to Activism**

In examining the relationship between identity, activism and well-being, I was interested in how the participants arrived at certain identities; how we came to identify as
lesbians, and as activists. Moreover, I was interested in the process of politicization, or how our identities moved from individualistic ones to one that was collective, and consequently, political.

As many theorists have noted (Phelan, 1994; Taylor and Whittier, 1992; Smith, 1999; Richardson, 1999; Shah, 1993), coming to political consciousness is connected to how people name themselves and how this claiming of identity is brought into a political context. Equating identity and political consciousness presupposes that it is a political act to identify and that identity is a necessary aspect of political organizing (Newman, 1997). This assumption was reflected in the interviews, where we talked about claiming a lesbian identity (among other politicized identities) as an act of resistance. The participants relied on the foundational assumption of identity politics, namely that identities must be solidly in place for political action to be taken (Butler, 1990).

For Chris, being a lesbian and an activist were one and the same:

Part of the coming out process has been being an activist because it’s not just a question of coming out to your friends and family and all that stuff, but it’s also a question of being very public and that sort of pushes it, for me, it pushes it a step further (Chris, individual interview).

Da also made the link between coming to lesbian identity and becoming politically active. Speaking about her involvement in feminist organizing during the 1970s in England, she noted:

It’s the chicken and egg stuff...what I thought about was that in my first 6 or 8 years of political work... I would say that I would be unable to tell the difference between my political work and my identity as a lesbian. It was as seamless as that...it was like breathing air. Part of being a lesbian was being involved. (Da, individual interview)
For some of the participants, identifying as a lesbian took their activism in a different direction. Chris talked about how her activism, within her role as a Roman Catholic nun, was very much focused outside of herself, on the issues of others. While in the Church, she “naturally” got involved with social justice work, in particular supporting the Chilean people in resisting the dictatorship of Pinochet. Initially, being an ally was simpler, as she did not recognize herself as sharing the experience of oppression; in a sense, it wasn’t about her. However, as she came to an awareness of her sexuality, she was forced to examine the places where she too experienced being silenced, being Other:

And at some point, in working with and walking with these women, I had to recognize that I was also involved in this experience of oppression and liberation and that whole tension and dynamic around my issues of sexuality and so I had to come to some place of resolution of that for myself, recognizing that, here I was, you know, supporting people and working with people and walking with people to become liberated from the external oppression of the dictatorship but I had all this old stuff in my life in terms of my relationship to the Roman Catholic Church which was very...oppressive of women, and certainly of lesbians...(Chris, individual interview)

Getting involved with social justice work was also a way that many of the participants came to a positive sense of themselves as women, and as lesbians. Robin noted that she hadn’t encountered lesbians until she did political work. Similarly, Anne stated that it wasn’t until she met lesbians who were political and had a “positive sense of their lesbian identity” that she claimed this identity in a public way for herself. For several of the participants, re-naming oneself and becoming a political actor were virtually simultaneous events. As Chris noted:

I think it gives me a place to act positively...I spent so many years of my life, when I was younger, as a lesbian, sort of hidden and closeted, and it was so damaging, right? Now, being an activist is...the reverse of that. So rather than the...internal...eating away, it sort of flips it around and gives me a chance to put a positive spin on it (Chris, individual interview).
Many of the participants articulated that coming to identify as a lesbian was inextricably linked to their initial, burgeoning consciousness around a number of other social issues. When I asked Anne about the link between the different types of political work she had been involved with over the years, she noted that:

The link between it all, whether it’s... class or racism or heterosexism is that... when you do one piece of work around one area, so when your eyes kind of open to something around class... it’s like the domino effect. It opens your eyes to other stuff that you might not be conscious of...(Anne, individual interview).

For Nen, Da and I, claiming a lesbian identity opened the door to political consciousness around our own experiences of racist oppression. For Nen:

What kind of started me [being politicized], I guess it’s obvious because you start with your own identity, right? As part of the process of claiming...space to be in as a dyke, a lesbian, a woman of colour, a woman, right? But...it started off from coming out [as a lesbian] and then [becoming politicized] as a woman of colour (Nen, individual interview).

The connection between personal experience and activism guided her through her work around queer issues, feminist organizing and anti-racist work. It also manifested in her involvement in HIV/AIDS organizing, the catalyst for which was her own HIV diagnosis.

Although Da’s claiming a lesbian identity was tied to her activism, she struggled to integrate her identities (as a lesbian and a woman of colour) in the context of organizing with white women. Da noted that her politicization around being a feminist and a lesbian was much more supported by other activists than her identity as a woman of colour. In fact, as a woman of colour, she was invisible to her fellow organizers:

I think the turning point for me was a particular incident that happened at the women’s centre, which I had been a part of, well a founder of, with a group of women, and I had been involved for 7 years at that time. As I said, everyone that I was involved with, in terms of working, volunteering, etc. for all those years, were white women. We were in this meeting and...somebody brought up this issue saying “you know, we really ought to think of getting more women of colour... we don’t have any women of colour involved here!” and I was sitting in
the room, right? And I think that really kind of woke me up as to what had happened, how people saw me (Da, individual interview).

Da felt that it was her need for community, and for acceptance around her identity as a lesbian, that forced her to compartmentalize her multiple identities and to remain silent around the racism of her white co-organizers:

Part of, maybe this is contradictory to what is going on for a lot of people living their lives, feeling very, very at home and embraced by a particular community usually involved cutting off a part of yourself [in this case her identity as a woman of colour]. And for a time, that’s been my experience, it’s OK. It’s like, there’s so much that you find nourishing about the hominess, the acceptance of this part of yourself, that you let the other parts atrophy (Da, individual interview) (emphasis mine).

I also talked about how the public expression of my identity as a woman of mixed heritage had come after years of being politicized as a lesbian. Despite a deep, personal connection to my ethnicity and strong ties to a large Arab family, I had struggled to claim this identity in a public way, always feeling somehow inauthentic:

You know, it’s never been a big thing for me to be out as a dyke...I haven’t struggled around that the same way as I’ve struggled to understand and claim my identity as mixed [heritage]. I think for mixed people there’s that feeling of being inauthentic...based on some weird notions of racial purity, like I’m not really Lebanese because I’m a half-breed. And I’ve certainly had a hard time asserting that identity with certain parts of my lesbian community, particularly with white women because they don’t necessarily support me claiming that...I don’t know if it...threatens them in some way because they start to see me as not-white when really, it’s easier for them to view me as “the same”. I haven’t found that women of colour put the same...burden of proof on me around my identity...it’s easier for them to get the issues around invisibility etc. that I think mixed people struggle with (Maria, individual interview).

Nen also talked about the struggle to claim an integrated identity, noting that over time, fragments of self shifted into layers so “I wasn’t more [lesbian, Asian woman, working class] than the other.”
The (relative) ease with which some of us were able to claim our identities as lesbians speaks to the historical silencing around race in white lesbian feminist organizing. As Holmes (2000) asks, who sees themselves reflected in the dominant discourses within lesbian feminism? Who can claim the identity “lesbian” without having to defend the right to it? For some of us, claiming a politicized lesbian identity was separate from the other fragments of our selves. It was a step towards integration, but why was it the first one we took, the least painful? The willingness to compartmentalize, to break it down, illuminates the need to find meaning in collective identity, even when that identity does not reflect all of who we are. As Butler (1990) argues:

The feminist ‘we’ is always only a phantasmatic construction, one that has its purposes, but which denies the internal complexity and indeterminacy of the term and constitutes itself only through the exclusion of some part of the constituency that it simultaneously seeks to represent (p. 142).

Looking for Self, Looking for Home

We [lesbians] are homeless. We do not have a State. We do not have a land. And I think...there was a drive to go out in the world because I needed to be mirrored (Anne, focus group).

Some of the women I interviewed talked about activism as a search for home, for purpose, for family, as well as a search for self. The desire for commonality, or at least the promise of commonality, was articulated numerous times throughout the discussions. The participants felt the need for community, and for a sense of home, a place where all of their identities could exist at once, without fragmentation.

Many of the conversations, particularly those centering on the claiming of a politicized lesbian identity, mirrored the psychological processes outlined by Sally Munt (1998). As Munt argues, for many lesbians, entry into a lesbian community “facilitated
such huge relief at the perceived end to alienation and ostracism that a fantasy chimera of home is fostered (maybe even festers)” (p. 121). Da echoed this, acknowledging that seeking a sense of family was a key motivator for her early political involvement:

I was wondering if in fact all of us got involved in activism in some way because of a lack, something we needed that we thought we could fill by this stuff that we did. I mean, I’m just wondering about that. For me, I think in hindsight what I was looking for was family and that is what activism was for me... a motivating force. That’s not to deny that I cared about what I was doing, about the cause underneath it (Da, focus group).

Several of the women acknowledged that “community” was an amorphous term, with multiple meanings and mythical significance. Although writings on the concept of community detail the variety of connotations it has, the participants talked about a community of mutual identification and shared consciousness. The notion of community that the participants employed was similar to Phelan’s (1994) voluntarist conception, one that distinguishes between externally imposed and socially derided identities and self-made, affirming ones.

A number of lesbian theorists have argued that it is through this process of reclamation, of establishing a collective identity, that we become invested in the ideal of community as stable and harmonious (Ross, 1995; Khan, 1999; Phelan, 1994; Green, 1997). We hold tightly to the belief that our community is unified, with an undisputable history, common values and shared goals. This leads us to see community as a place of shelter, as “home”, as the antithesis of alienation. Fundamentally, such a view relies on conflating collective identity with sameness, with stability and intra-group equality. Munt (1998) argues that this parallels the psychological process of coming to claim lesbian identity:
Early interactions result in a period of infatuation with seemingly secure out lesbians, who are imagined to embody the assured, stable identity we lack. The initial solidarity we feel is akin to falling in love. As the relationship proceeds and tensions arise, real selves intervene and the disappointment is profound. Instead of withdrawing, bitter, hurt and overwhelmed, we would do better to appraise and own the measure of shame which drives us to compensate so needfully (p. 121).

Although several of the participants used the terms “lesbian community”, “women’s community”, “women of colour community”, “queer community”, their employment of the terms was countered by their experiences of disappointment, sense of betrayal and disillusionment. This implicit contradiction did not stop us from using “community” as a reference; we just used the concept in quotation marks, indicating an awareness of the limitations of its usefulness. As I commented in my interview:

We all use the word “community”...we talk about “coming home”...and then we talk about how it doesn’t really exist...like we use that term while simultaneously debunking the myth of it with the stories of bitter disappointment, being trashed by other women etc. Yeah, I’ve come to see it as a kind of laziness, like a shorthand we use because we all...know what it means, right? Even though we all know that it’s a big fantasy (Maria, individual interview).

**Shattered Illusions: Problematizing Community**

Lesbians should not refuse the specificity and reality of lesbian experience, nor should we reify our experience into an identity and history so stable that no one can speak to it besides other lesbians who agree on that particular description of their existence (Phelan, 1994, p. 56).

Romanticized notions of lesbian identity and community have been challenged by lesbians of colour (Richardson, 1999; Lorde, 1984; Smith, 1999; Silvera, 1991), First Nations lesbians (Chrystos, 1983), bisexual and trans activists and writers (Feinberg, 1996, 1999; Califia, 1997; Ault, 1996; Storr, 1997) and poor and working class lesbians (Penelope, 1994; Allison, 1995). Queer activists and writers have opposed essentialist notions of lesbian identity, offering a critique of the rigid categories that inform them.
These writings have confronted white middle-class lesbian feminists on racist, anti-Semitic, gender and classist oppression within lesbian communities. They have called for political action and analysis based on an interlocking analysis of oppressions.

The participants used the term “lesbian community” even while problematizing and deconstructing it. Often, the ambivalence about the ideal of community came from the participants’ experiences of oppression around race and anti-Semitism, class and gender within lesbian communities. Robin talked about her indifference to the concept of lesbian community:

See, I have trouble with the phrase “our community”. I’m struggling to understand what you guys were saying...there are so many different pieces of me that I can never find... I don’t fit in. I don’t fit in because I’m American, Jewish, working class, femme... like I can just go through the litany. So I have trouble with even that word “our community” (Robin, focus group).

Seeing community as sameness, collective identity as sisterhood obscures the power relations within lesbian communities and maintains the claim to innocence embedded in white Western lesbian feminist theory and practice (Razack, 1998).

As Mala articulated:

People are like “We’re all women, we should all get along”, that kind of liberal bullshit that I can’t cope with, you know, that BS liberalism... that’s just the easy way of dealing with the complexities of having a “community”. That’s why I use the phrase collection of people nowadays. Because “community” implies something that I don’t necessarily see happening on a wide enough scale (Mala, individual interview).

Mala noted that the “false sense of sisterhood” camouflages the power relationships between women and obscures the privileging of certain subjectivities: white, middle-class, able-bodied, androgynous or butch. Newman (1997) echoes this in her study of the “bisexuality wars” in a Jewish lesbian feminist organizing group, noting “like the subject
that knows itself best in contrast with the Other, the community is delineated as much as by who is excluded as by who belongs” (p. 113).

While the rhetoric of “family”, of “home” might fulfill a need for commonality and safety for some women, it falls short in the translation. Underlying the rhetoric is an expectation of emotional safety and unconditional acceptance, desires that most often prove unrealistic. As Phelan (1994) asks, “How many of us have experienced a family that is what the rhetoric of community invokes as a model?” (p. 78).

Despite problematizing notions of community, all of the participants talked about the benefits of being a part of a community of some sort. In some cases, these communities were based on shared ethnicity, race or spirituality. When this was the case, we talked about how we had often sought out these communities as a way to deal with the fragmentation of our identities. However, participants acknowledged the limitations of these communities, just as we had named the difficulties of “being all of who I am” (Robin, individual interview) or “being integrated” (Da, individual interview) in lesbian communities. Robin talked about the importance of her connection to a group of “lefty” Jewish friends, but noted that all of them are heterosexual. Da echoed this, naming the sense of “compartmentalization” she experiences in her involvement with a Buddhist group that is primarily white, middle-class and heterosexual.

Several of the participants talked about the benefits of organizing with other lesbians and of being part of a “lesbian community”. We talked about the substantial social support that came from being involved with political work with other women and how the web of friendships gained through organizing sustained us in times of crisis. I
named the protective function of community (Phelan, 1994), noting that my sense of collective identity worked as a buffer from homophobic and heterosexist oppression:

Even though we always talk about how “community” doesn’t exist, I feel like for me, living and working among a certain “lesbian community” has been really beneficial for me...on some level, I feel that it provides a buffer for me and protects me a bit from the outside world. I feel like I’m among my own...in a way, I guess as much as one can feel that. I mean, we all use the term “the lesbian community” and then say it doesn’t exist... it must hold some meaning for us...if we keep using the term (Maria, individual interview).

Da also talked about the benefits of community, seeing her “outlaw” (Munt, 1999) status as a lesbian and feminist as enabling her to question and resist:

Part of being a feminist has been about, and being a lesbian has been about challenging and living in this sort of community that is about challenging normal modes of doing things. It has given me more leeway to question...how I should be. Even though I talk about the confines [of lesbian community]...it’s given me the tools, the way...if you do not accept the world the way it is actually presented to you in one aspect, it’s easy enough to not accept the world in other aspects (Da, individual interview).

Reconciling Divergent Identities

A number of theorists have argued that gay and lesbian organizing has coalesced around identity in a similar way to organizing around race (Epstein, 1987; Phelan, 1994; Gamson, 1995). Dominant representations of people of colour and sexual minorities have relied on similarly simplified and inter-dependent stereotypes (Gilman, 1992). To counter hegemonic discourses, marginalized groups have struggled for self-representation. In an effort to speak back to the dominant, to say “this is who we really are”, these attempts have reinscribed notions of the self as essential and have demanded a representation of sameness. While somewhat useful as a political strategy, universalizing experience may have outgrown its utility. In his work on essentialism in representations of blackness, Stuart Hall (1992) argues:
You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject. Now, that formulation may seem to threaten the collapse of an entire political world. Alternatively, it may be greeted with extraordinary relief at the passing away of what at one time seemed a necessary fiction. Namely, either that all black people are good or indeed that all black people are the same (p. 254).

Hall's "necessary fiction", or strategic essentialism, is predicated on a binary logic that positions homosexuality as an "absent presence" (in the discussion of race), much as race has been the "absent presence" (Morrison, 1992) in lesbian feminist theorizing and organizing. Hall notes the reversal of representation but what underlies the representation of an "essentially good" black subject is not made explicit; that is, to be "good" and "the same" means to be heterosexual. The categories, such as white/good, black/bad, (or hetero/good, homo/bad) rely on simplistic, polarized conceptualizations of identity, obscuring how these conceptions rely on one another for meaning (Kadi, 1996).

The necessary fiction demands a singular, stable conception of identity and relies on an additive model of oppression. In practical terms, the either/or discourse can position one between communities (Rich, 1989). As Mala pointed out:

I think it [asserting a lesbian identity] shifted me away from some of the work I had done previously. And I think that makes sense, like when you’re coming out, right? Before I would do stuff in the black community, like [black health organization] and I moved right away from that. And I moved right into dealing just with women, like in the women’s community. And that was unfortunate because therein lies the split, right? Where the phobias in my black community are... I’m not going to be able to do what I need to do [within that community] (Mala, individual interview).

I echoed this in my interview, naming the struggle to negotiate multiple identities and feeling forced to choose between divergent communities:

It’s about integration for me...in my own family, my extended family, I’ve been trying to figure out how to be myself when everything about me is kinda weird to
them. They are a contradictory bunch, really assimilationist and like Lebanese nationalists at the same time. I’m a lesbian, I work with addicts and HIV positive women... I mean, they think I’m a freak. So sometimes, you get to that place where it’s easier to...move away and just do women’s stuff...running to that as a safe haven (laughs)... that political idea of sisterhood. Then you get there and you don’t feel totally at home there either, you have to deal with people’s stuff, like racism or just ignorance. How do you bring it together so it’s not gender and sexuality over here in my life and race or ethnicity over here? (Maria, individual interview).

Striving for integration, particularly around race, ethnicity and sexuality, was highlighted in the interviews with Nen, Robin, Da, Mala and in my own interview. Mala offered insight into how lesbians of colour reconcile (seemingly) divergent identities and communities, noting the movement between communities as a strategy. Talking about her experiences organizing in the black community, Mala commented that issues around class and sexuality within that community sometimes made her retreat:

And so, part of the integration is part of honouring myself and knowing when I want to enter and when I don’t want to enter [the black community]. And when the confusion I feel, well, not confusion, but sense of “this is not home” it’s better than the feeling of being in a wasteland (Mala, individual interview) (emphasis mine).

Robin echoed the need for integration in the focus group, talking about a time in her life when she tried consciously to make connections with other Jewish lesbians. She found this difficult, noting that the new people she met “were often neither Jewish nor lesbians”. However, her comments were indicative of the hunger for integration around multiple identities articulated by several of the participants. The conscious searching for a community of shared identity was a common strategy among the participants as well.

Silences

Despite an emphasis on our experience of oppressions, or perhaps because of this focus, we failed to talk at length about how we are implicated in power relations, how we
use power over other women. Anne, in both her interview and the focus group, talked about this, naming the use of additive models as one way that white lesbians can "maintain our whiteness" and avoid being challenged about our\(^6\) own racism. She pointed out that when we come together as lesbians, the focus on our experience of heterosexism and homophobia often dominate the discussion and obscure how lesbians of colour, Aboriginal lesbians, and working class lesbians experience racist and classist oppression at our hands. This strategy enables us to see ourselves only as oppressed, obscuring the places in which we hold and use power against other women.

Anne raised this issue in the focus group, talking about the centre in the lesbian community as being white, middle class and butch. While this provided an opening to talk more about racism, no one took the opportunity. The women of colour I interviewed talked at length, in the space of our one-on-one conversation, about their experiences of racism and their process of politicization around race. These conversations were often painful for the participants, as they entailed recollecting experiences of exclusion, invisibility and hostility. Despite these individual discussions, the discussion in the focus group didn’t go far. The collective response to Anne’s remark was loud hoots of laughter and agreement.

In retrospect, I see that my emphasis on lesbian identity utilizes the same additive model that I am critiquing now. I recognize that by framing the research around that identity alone, I may have encouraged this silence, looking only at how we are oppressed and empowered as lesbians. Despite the narratives told to me by women of colour in the individual interviews, I didn’t try to open up the conversation in the focus group. I failed

\(^6\) I use "our" here to acknowledge my own complicity in racism and to highlight the fluidity of my identity as a person of mixed heritage, even though I do not identify as white.
to reply to Anne’s comment directly and didn’t encourage the group to further the discussion.

My lack of engagement around raising this in the group stemmed from my own fears. Primarily, I think I was apprehensive about getting into a heated discussion around race in a mixed race group. Although I talked about race in my personal relationships with Mala, Da and Nen, and about anti-Semitism in my friendship with Robin, we rarely did so in the presence of white women. Indeed, Nen and I had talked at length (outside of the context of this project) about the difficulties of naming race in mixed race groups and our frustrations of dealing with defensiveness on the part of white feminists. Although I wasn’t conscious of it at the time, in retrospect I can see that I was concerned about opening up a conversation that might elicit defensiveness from some participants and cause pain or discomfort for others.

While I see my lack of probing as both cowardly and patronizing, I also felt that I was responding to the mood in the group. When Anne made her comment, the response was strong and boisterous. However, the response from the women of colour in the group quickly shut down the conversation, albeit in a humorous way. It is worthwhile to look at an excerpt from the transcript. Leading up to Anne’s analysis about whiteness, we had been talking about Phelan’s (1994) theory of lesbian community as a pedagogical space where lesbians learn the “how to’s” of lesbian identity:

Anne: But I think it makes sense that the lesbian community... it’s a microcosm of the larger community, so of course it’s white, middle class and butch.

Laughter.

Anne: and misogynist.
Laughter and loud hooting. Group members talking all at once but inaudible over the peals of laughter.

Anne: We’re (inaudible over laughter)... the only thing we talk about is our oppression as lesbians so all the other stuff, we get to maintain it. We get to maintain our misogyny, maintain our whiteness, maintain the norm with the exception of our [sexual] orientation.

Da: Yeah.

Robin: That’s interesting.

Nen: There’s something bilateral going on there...[reference to an earlier discussion about the Angela Davis lecture that most participants had attended. Davis apparently used the term “bilateral” many times during her talk on social movements and new directions for identity politics.]

Nen: I know who coined that term.

Da: This is interesting. OK, so what’s the fourth thing? [referring back to Phelan’s theory of lesbian community.]

When this exchange was taking place in the group, I was looking at Da and Nen, who were seated side by side on one side of the room. When I reviewed my notes from the focus group, I had jotted down that Da looked me directly in the eye when she moved the group back to a discussion of Phelan’s theory and I had written “race: don’t go there?” While I doubt that this was conscious on her part, it seems indicative of a lack of safety in discussing racism within the group. In retrospect, I feel some ambivalence about not re-opening the discussion on whiteness. On one hand, I feel that I shied away from it and see this as evidence of my complicity in the silence. On the other, I feel that I was respecting what I understood to be concerns about safety in the group.

It is important to note that after Anne’s remarks in the focus group, there was only one other exchange where race was explicitly mentioned. This was in a conversation about activists’ disillusionment coming from shattered illusions of sameness in the
feminist movement, a discussion that seemed to carry less potential for discomfort among us.
Chapter 5

Activism as a Determinant of Well-Being

In 1998, as I had for many years, I attended the “Take Back the Night” march in downtown Vancouver. This march is a longstanding tradition to attract attention to the issue of violence against women and to bring women together in a display of solidarity to claim both physical and cultural space. As I walked along the street, surrounded by a sea of women, I felt that adrenalin rush, a familiar sense of exhilaration, a feeling of joy. On a street corner, I ran into an acquaintance, a woman I knew through the network of lesbian feminist organizers in Vancouver. She embraced me, shouting “Sometimes being a rabble-rouser feels great, eh?” I laughed and continued on, but her words stayed with me.

As noted earlier in Chapter One, there has been little examination of lesbian activism and the impacts that it has on individuals and communities. Part of my motivation for wading into what feels like uncharted territory is to understand, and name, the positive impact of lesbian identity and activism on well-being. Talking about the protection functions of identity and politicization has implications for the development of oppositional discourses and actions. As Holmes (2000) notes in her study of community-based “lesbian abuse” education, discourse informs what we understand as real or true, “it enables our experiences to having meaning and significance – in other words, to be known and seen” (p. 78).

In this chapter, I examine the relationship between activism and well-being in the lives of the participants. Again, the women I talked with disrupted dominant discourses, questioning the assumption embedded in the lesbian health and social movement
literatures. Through their stories, the participants complicated the conception of lesbian identity as solely marginal, a fringe existence. We also disputed the discourse that well-being is decided by barriers to the mainstream health care system, naming involvement in social justice work as a significant determinant of health. We disrupted the notion of lesbian health as determined by only by homophobia, offering an interlocking analysis of oppressions such as race and class. We also offered suggestions for supporting and sustaining activism, and it is with these that I conclude the thesis.

**Definitions of Activism**

At the outset of this project, I made some assumptions. I assumed that the people I saw as activists identified in that way themselves. I also presumed that their definitions and understandings of activism were similar to mine. Throughout the interviews and focus group, the participants challenged my suppositions, questioning me on my use of the terms “activist” and “activism”, their meaning, context and usefulness. A few of the participants expressed ambivalence about that identity, talking about how its resonance to their experience had shifted with time. Others claimed activist as an identity wholeheartedly, seeing it as seamlessly integrated with other aspects of themselves.

When I shared with Mala my awareness that I had asked to interview people I saw as activists, she thanked me for recognizing my lens and drew a parallel to contemporary North American lesbians understanding butch identity as universal and ahistorical. She commented:

I keep having to explain that butch is a completely North American cultural reference and...you gotta be really careful about...seeing things and that they might not always be the label that you expect to put on it. I would never deny any of those labels [activist]. I’d want to be careful though ‘cause I see so many
people doing tons of other work [and not being recognized as such] (Mala, individual interview).

What Mala does not explicitly say in this remark is that claiming activist as an identity is inextricably linked to one’s social location. For many women of colour, Aboriginal women, women with disabilities and poor and working-class women, political struggle is a ceaseless reality, a part of daily life. However, these experiences of oppression and resistance are often overlooked in social movements literature because they might not reflect a white, middle class understanding of political activism. Mala’s remark highlights my understanding of “activism”, illuminating how my choice of language limited whose voices were heard.

The participants were active in political work around a number of different issues: feminism, anti-racism, queer issues, environmental work, as well as being involved in coalitions that addressed social justice more broadly. We approached our political work from a number of different ideological positions: some did their work primarily outside of systems and had a more revolutionary politic, organizing marches and other direct actions. Others worked within institutions on policy and procedural change, guided by a more reformist agenda. Often, the participants did both. I saw the divergent manifestations of their political passions to be equally activist and was unprepared for the hesitation with which some of the participants claimed this identity.

It seemed that despite my broad definition of social change work, a number of the participants held direct action to be the only legitimate form of activism. In some cases, this was tied to a particular historically situated understanding of social justice work in the 1960s and 70s and to recent media representations of activism around the 1997 APEC Summit in Vancouver and the WTO demonstrations in Seattle in 1999. Throughout the
interviews I came to see this view of activism as the dominant discourse, a discourse that the participants both employed and contested.

Anne talked about her activism as moving away from in-your-face strategies of the queer rights movement to more “subtle” work around employment equity in the corporate sector. However, she acknowledged her continued reliance on a narrow definition of activism, one that reflected the dominant discourse:

So, automatically, it’s [diversity work in a corporate setting] a form of activism ‘cause it’s about social change, changing organizational systems to make them more...inclusive and welcoming...when I think of activism, I think of the placard wearing, sign carrying, kind of ACT UP!, in your face kind of activism. And I think there are very different forms of activism and I think I tend to work more subtly than that, although sometimes I get fed up and I’m not subtle at all! (Anne, individual interview).

Robin didn’t see herself as being an activist now, but as someone who supported activism. She made a distinction between being on the front lines and doing work that is behind the scenes. In a sense, the distinction she made was between working outside of systems and working within them. While her early organizing work was front-line and not reformist in nature (anti-imperialist and anti-war direct actions), Robin seemed to see her current involvement as less directly activist:

Maybe it’s because at [organization] we’ve done a lot of work figuring out what our network is so there’s been a lot of work around defining what’s advocacy and what’s supporting advocacy. I see myself more as supporting advocacy, that I’m not somebody out there speaking out but I’m definitely supportive of it (Robin, individual interview).

The participants all talked about their involvement in political work, and consequently, how they saw themselves, as shifting over time. Da talked about her early organizing work in England, naming feminist identity as inherently active but articulating some ambivalence about the word “activist”: 
...the word activist... that particular word was not part of the identity that I was building... No... I wouldn’t use that. What I would say is that the whole time I was involved in England, I would say I am part of the women’s movement, I am a feminist. Of course, what does that mean? Well, to me, just saying you’re a feminist means you’re an activist... you can’t be an armchair feminist, by my reckoning (Da, individual interview).

In talking about her early feminist organizing work, Da recollected that direct action campaigns and grassroots organizing were seen as the only “real” and “legitimate” efforts at social change. She noted that these actions were guided by a belief that women coming together in protest had the potential to “completely transform society”, an idea she now found laughable and naive. She stated within this historical context, other kinds of change work (such as policy development, corporate diversity training) would have defied the bounds of feminist activism. A number of other participants also equated activism with direct action, despite their current involvements in policy and legislative challenges, corporate diversity work and other strategic initiatives.

Anne talked about how the equation of dissent and social change work with “in your face” direct actions benefits the interests of the dominant:

I’m wondering about the actual word activism, if it’s kind of fallen under the same fate as feminism, in terms of, you know, 20 years ago, activism meant a broad range of social change efforts, right? But in terms of how it’s been taken by the media and thrown back at us, it’s now placard waving people out of control. Which is a really good way of discouraging people from becoming activists, right? (Anne, focus group).

I echoed Anne’s thoughts in my own interview, where I talked about the difficulty of claiming activist as an identity. I saw a parallel between this individual struggle and the crisis of legitimacy facing social movements, particularly given the media representation of large scale protests like the WTO demonstrations in Seattle in November of 2000. I
also alluded to the process by which this dominant discourse is both utilized and resisted in activist communities:

I think sometimes it’s hard to gain credibility, especially when activism is portrayed...by the media. You can look at the WTO demos as an example. They make it look like the demonstrators are all white kids with dreadlocks in army fatigues, almost as a way of discrediting any opposition. ...I think it’s hard because on one hand we ourselves [activists] may talk about that as the only “legitimate” form of protest even if we ourselves are doing other kinds [of social justice work], like policy change stuff...As if we’re embarrassed about it. And... then in the mainstream, they use that...same understanding to portray us as a bunch of malcontented losers. They never...showed the suits and the grandmothers that were protesting in Seattle...not at all. And...they really didn’t show...the relationship between the issues, like between issues around women’s work, the environment right? So it just looks like some unfocused free for all...I think it serves their interests to make it look like that...it certainly discredits them...the protesters, you know? (Maria, individual interview).

Several of the participants made distinctions between their paid work and volunteer work, with volunteer work more likely to be described as activist. This was true even for women who worked (for pay) in equity-seeking organizations, which was several of the participants. Such a split seemed to reinforce the dominant discourse that defines activism as something done outside social systems, and work that is done on a voluntary basis. In some cases, the distinction between activism and paid work mirrored a split between work that was done for others, albeit based on principles of social justice, and work that was done for oneself or one’s community.

Chris talked about this split, defining her advocacy work around lesbian and gay immigration issues as activism, and seeing her work around women’s and children’s issues in the Downtown Eastside as less so. I was surprised by this differentiation, given that her paid work is focused on providing housing for women living in poverty and experiencing violence. It is worth quoting the conversation at length as her description is particularly evocative:
Chris: ...well, it’s funny because in...other times in my life, there hasn’t been that separation. ...my work, and my life has been about the same thing, whereas now, there’s a bit more of a separation between my job and [my activism]... it’s [paid work] still involved in an area where there’s lots of potential for that. But I don’t identify that as activism. I don’t see myself in that role as much as being an activist. At other times, I might have, and I still, occasionally...go to an End Legislated Poverty meeting or rally, and...we went to the Immigration forum around the Chinese “boat people” the other night and stuff like that so... I still will do that, dabble in it, but at the moment, my energy is definitely around the lesbian stuff...that’s where I feel at the moment that I need to concentrate. And the other one is my job even though I’m happy my job also incorporates some of those other pieces.

Maria: So, what exactly is the criterion that determines whether it’s activism or not?

Chris: ...for me, that it’s much more challenging the system. Like, in my job, I participate and I go to things and I’m involved with groups that do challenge the system but I don’t feel like I take as active a role in that. Whereas in the other stuff, I take a very active role in it. I think it’s the level or degree of activity...And partly, I think that’s probably just part of my own personal journey ‘cause I’ve done a lot of that other stuff, right, and this is where I need to be right now. It’s more...about who I am. And it identifies more with my own history, my own issues and struggles than with other folks. And I can still be with other people in their, I mean, I’m still with the women in the Downtown Eastside. I’m still a part of that, but hey, right now, (laughs) it’s about me... and us.

When I asked Nen whether or not she considered herself to be an activist, she replied with some hesitation. Despite being actively involved in feminist, queer, anti-racist and HIV/AIDS community organizing for almost 10 years, Nen felt that her identity as an activist had recently solidified and that she had “proved” herself worthy of the title:

I think that if you had asked me that two years ago, I would say no, even though I had been working in the community. No, because I feel like that’s such...an honour to be able to call yourself that. It’s a lot of hard work. But I think that now, I would say yeah, because I think I’ve done my time to be able to say that (Nen, individual interview).

In the individual interviews, we spoke about activism solely as something “out there”, as a public demonstration of our values and beliefs. In retrospect, I think this was
one of my fundamental assumptions and I framed the questions accordingly. This was challenged by several of the participants in the focus group. They pushed me to think about activism in a smaller, yet equally significant way, conceptualizing activism as a day-to-day practice of kindness towards others.

In the focus group, Chris said that she had come away from the interview with some discomfort. The questions I asked didn’t quite capture her practice of activism or her understanding of social change work as starting with daily interactions with friends and strangers. She stated:

I think for me sometimes the confusion was between seeing activism as something that’s always out there, in your face, public, and there is a piece of that that historically has been identified and in the interview, that’s what was going around in my head. And afterwards, I had this sense of there also being something else that has to do with how I live in relationship to other people and...how I incorporate those values into my life and into...who I am and how I interact with other people (Chris, focus group).

Chris differentiated between consciousness of a political kind and a more spiritual kind of consciousness, where one sees oneself as connected to all things and moves through the world accordingly. She pointed out the disjuncture in separating the private and public manifestations of our values, noting the importance of the micro in social change work. This was echoed by Da, who mused about the privileging of the macro, public kind of activism over the micro:

I’m not even sure whether, in fact, the macro works better than the micro. I mean, in some ways, I’m wondering, and maybe this comes from my...kind of disillusionment from a lot of activism that I had been involved in... activism in the typical way that we see it, and having extended huge amounts of energy, from huge numbers of women, and when, we look at what the world is now [not a lot has changed] (Da, focus group).

She went on to say, “And then, if you think about it from the micro kind of personal, like relating to each other, I can almost see that more clearly having an impact, in a ripple
effect kind of thing.” Robin agreed, noting the irony that this is how change was being made “rather than at Gay Pride marches and stuff like that.” The group seemed to agree that there had been too much emphasis on the activism “out there” and not on the “ways of being” (Maria, focus group) that reflected social justice values. However, they felt that it was both the external activism and the more individual acts of kindness that collectively made change happen.

I found it interesting that the older participants (Da, Chris, Anne and Robin), the women with the longest histories of organizing, were the ones to point to the importance of ways of being that embodied values of kindness and justice. For Anne, Chris and Da, this awareness seemed rooted in their spiritual practice, something that they all talked about in the individual interviews. They talked about the need to integrate spirituality into their daily life, refuting the separation between activism, spirit and social interactions. As Chris noted “spirituality isn’t something that you kind of do over here [away from the other parts of your life]” (Chris, individual interview).

For some of the participants, the emphasis on a practice of kindness was partially connected to their experiences of trashing, betrayal and hurt in organizing with other women. Several of the participants talked about this, in both the individual interviews and the focus group, and identified this as one of main reasons for burnout. This is explored as a theme later in this chapter.

“I Don’t Know How to be Any Other Way”: Activism and Identity as Seamless

I need... I know I’m going to spend the rest of my life doing social change work. I know there’s a very good chance that it’s going to be at the corporate level, but that I’m going to come into it in a very personal way (Anne, individual interview).
Just as the participants saw our lesbian identity as essentially “who we are”, we defined our involvement in political work as an organic, inescapable part of ourselves. We talked about trying to take holidays from activism, to “recover” (Da, individual interview) from commitments to social justice work and laughed about our “inevitable” (Maria, individual interview) return to political work.

Seeing her involvement as inextricably linked to her daily experiences of oppression, particularly racism, Nen commented:

I don’t think, for me, I can ever stop, because day to day, I come out of the house and I will always be challenged by why people respond to me, or not respond to me, ignore me or completely tokenize me. So, it’s really hard for me to shut it off. Maybe for others, they can, but I don’t think I can (Nen, individual interview).

Chris also spoke of her drive to do social change work as an organic response to systemic oppression. She relayed the story of moving back to Canada from Chile with her partner, after they had both left the Roman Catholic Church. Her partner was not a Canadian citizen and they encountered difficulties with immigration. When they investigated their rights, they found that Chris was unable to sponsor her partner due to heterosexist bias in the immigration laws. In response, they formed LEGIT, the Lesbian and Gay Immigration Task Force and proceeded to launch a legal case against the Canadian government. When I told Chris that I found their actions remarkable, especially given that both she and her partner had been so closeted as lesbians in the Church, she replied:

It was a very natural thing. On some level, it was a very natural thing for us to move into that. Because by this time, my own coming out, well it wasn’t totally complete, but it was certainly...coming together more for me in my life. And it just seemed like the natural, next natural step to take right? So, to look at challenging the Immigration Regulation and to look at organizing around that, well, it was like of course... what else would you do? (Chris, individual interview) (emphasis mine).
She went on to say that:

There are basic commitments that keep me going and that I really, really believe in, very strongly, and that somehow seems to be, for me, a lifetime commitment. That's so deep... it's just so deep I don't know what else to do. I don't know any other way to be (Chris, individual interview).

The participants who articulated wanting to move away from front line activism told me that political work found them, sometimes despite their best intentions. Often, the participants would try to take a break, in some cases for health reasons, but would be unable to maintain any distance from their communities and consequently, from social change work. As Taylor and Rupp (1993) note, lesbian feminist organizing is often dependent on networks of women tied by bonds of sexual love and friendship. For example, Da expressed ambivalence about her involvement in some current actions but implied that for her, being politically active was inescapable:

And I feel like...I've been avoiding getting involved with things... it seems that, organically, I've got to know a lot of people...for better or for worse, whether I know them as friends or as acquaintances...they are involved in some ways, so that's obviously not a coincidence (Da, individual interview) (emphasis mine).

Other participants commented that it was difficult to “turn a blind eye” (Maria, individual interview) to injustice, noting that difficulty of remaining uninvolved. As Mala said in her individual interview “If you’re gonna complain about something, go figure it out!” For several of the participants, needing to get involved was tied to the therapeutic value of activism.

“If You’re Not Angry, Then I Guess You’re Not Paying Attention”: The Therapeutic Value of Activism

I think it’s good...[for my] confidence and self-esteem...I don’t feel as crazy in the world. I don’t feel isolated and I don’t feel alone, and there’s a way that there’s a comradeship around it, right? Like, ‘Oh, that’s happened to you too?’
That's incredible, it's an incredible feeling. And I think that helps my self-esteem, it helps my confidence in the world, that I'm not...alone and that this experience happens to other people. I mean, it enrages me but it also kind of calms me (Anne, individual interview).

Given that the participants came to activism out of a sense of Otherness, a feeling of marginalization, it makes sense that we saw political work as being therapeutic. Carrying our wounds into social justice work, the participants acknowledged that we sought solace in collective struggle. Often, we came to the work as a way to deal with unresolved issues in our lives. As Robin noted,

I think that my activism was really...when I got into it, was quite complicated because I was trying to... I never really worked out anything about my family and I had a lot of anger around that, so the activism and the anger... it sort of fit together (Robin, individual interview).

A key drive to getting involved was the promise of self-knowledge that would come through claiming an identity and organizing around that. All of the participants talked about the relationship between personal development and political organizing, seeing activism as a means to self-discovery. As Da said:

I think a lot of the reasons why I got involved with any and all of them [political actions and groups], at different stages, was just another way...to find myself, basically...again, it was totally un-self conscious, but looking at the different things I was involved in... definitely an attempt, in getting involved with these projects...to uncover different aspects of myself (Da, individual interview).

All of the participants made a connection between claiming their identities as lesbians, coming to activism, and self-knowledge. This process of reclamation was also one of healing, whereby the participants came to understand their own experiences of oppression and through that, to heal. Identifying one's own experience as both shared and macro-structural, was key to unlearning internalized oppressions and shame (particularly around race and sexuality). Sally Munt (1998) argues that shame can be a
facilitator of personal transformation and political agency; instead of a straightforward reversal, where shame becomes (and remains) pride, Munt suggests that lesbians oscillate between the two sides of the dichotomy. This theme was echoed by a number of the participants. As I said in my interview:

You try to turn things around, you know, to claim this positive identity, go to Pride marches, etc. but sometimes, it just creeps up on you. That feeling of shame, or freakishness, or...that feeling that your whole existence is somehow wrong. And usually, for me, that gets me out there. It pisses me off that I can still feel that way and it motivates me to...get out there and do something (Maria, individual interview).

The participants talked about the benefits of political work for one’s mental health. Nen, Chris and Anne identified the boost, the adrenalin rush that you get from working for change as having a positive impact on their mental well-being. I echoed this in my interview:

...when you’re involved in something, working with other women, sometimes you get that rush, and I think that for me, that rush is sustaining. It sustains me when I’m out in the world, dealing with... homophobia or dealing with those things that make me feel like I’m a freak... I think that it is somehow protective for me, that work...it gives me strength (Maria, individual interview).

Da and Anne stated that their political work made them more confident and several other participants noted how their involvement in social justice movements taught them skills such as conflict resolution and public speaking. All of the participants refuted the equation of social justice work with charity or altruism, stating unequivocally that we directly benefited from our involvement, regardless of how close to home the issue was. In this sense, we made a distinction between benefiting from activism that affected our lives directly (i.e., local actions) and benefiting from activism in and of itself. As Chris noted in the focus group:
It’s very clear to me that there’s been some needs met, some real personal needs of mine that have gotten met [through activism] and when they no longer... like when somehow, that need is no longer there, I wonder if that’s when I let go.

She went on to say:

...when I was younger, is this about being rebellious, is this about needing to cut loose from something, to get out from under...to have a voice, to be seen, you know? Some real deep, human, personal needs. Not just about changing the world. It was about that too, but there were also these other things, on another level, that were more motivating (Chris, focus group).

Da, Nen and Robin talked about the connections and friendships they had made through activism. Although they all identified the dysfunction and in-fighting in women’s organizing groups as damaging to individuals and the movements themselves, they also saw activist work as a place where they had made important friendships and where they received substantial social support. Anne and I echoed this, noting that we had both been mentored and supported by a number of activists in both the queer and feminist movements.

While the participants emphasized the positive impact of political work on our mental well-being, a couple of the participants acknowledged the sense of despair that often comes with personal awareness around injustice and oppression. Both Mala and Nen perceived there to be a high incidence of addiction among lesbian activists, commenting that this was a strategy some women used to cope with feelings of hopelessness, grief and depression. Nen commented on the double-edged nature of political consciousness:

There was a lot of substance abuse going on...I can connect that with being politicized because, like, where do you put all that stuff?...you feel really politicized and you feel really good and you understand everything, but everything is so bleak and crappy. So, another coping mechanism (Nen, individual interview).
Political consciousness gave us language to understand our own experiences and those of others as interconnected. Being able to frame our experiences in this way seemed to serve a protective function. However, this understanding also carried significant emotional impact, especially once we began to see our lives as linked to the struggles of others globally. A few of the participants expressed a half-hearted wish for ignorance, noting that once consciousness comes, “you can’t really turn it off” (Maria, individual interview):

You know, it’s the double-edged sword. On one hand, being politicized...it makes you feel like you’re not insane...it gives you answers to understand your experience as greater than just your own personal...neurosis or something. But sometimes I, I feel this huge sadness, like an overwhelming sense of despair...especially when you...start making the links and see how interconnected it all is (Maria, individual interview).

“My Body Has Taken the Toll of My Exuberance”: The Impact of Political Work on Physical Well-Being

Well, it’s ironic because I think so many activists...come to the work because of our embodied, our embodied oppression, and I think that when we do social change work, it’s all very external [to our physical being] (Maria, in Anne’s interview).

Most of the participants, in both the focus group and the individual interviews, spoke of the extreme expectations in lesbian activist circles and the pressure to “give it all for the cause” (Maria, individual interview). Often, participants felt that the “seamlessness” of their lives made it difficult to separate their political organizing from the rest of their lives. This lack of boundaries meant that several women had no rest from social justice work. As Da noted, referring to lesbian feminist organizing in the 1970s,

It was my life; it was my social life, it was my work life, it was my volunteer life, I mean, everything was in and around it, so...there was no way of actually saying ok, I’m going to leave that and pick up this other bit of my other life, really. So, in that way, it was totally integrated (Da, individual interview).
Nen reiterated the all-consuming nature of grassroots political work and the expectation that women activists will work tirelessly, often at the expense of individual well-being:

... it’s such a culture, that activism. There’s such a culture of “Oh, you gotta do this for your community, you gotta do this for your community ‘cause if you’re just thinking about yourself...” this kind of group...ethic becomes more important than...your down time... right? So, that’s been...the downside of it (Nen, individual interview).

While the participants identified the positive impact of politicization and social justice work on their mental health, we felt that the work itself had negative consequences for our physical well-being. During many of the interviews and the focus group, we talked about this relationship in a folkloric way. It was taken for granted that women who are politically active end up with “chronic this and chronic that” (Nen, individual interview), eventually leaving social justice work because of illnesses that are often stress-related. Da noted that self-exploitation is “viewed as a manifestation of your degree of commitment”, commenting that many women disappeared forever from activist circles because of extreme burnout.

Mala talked about her early involvement with AIDS activism and the impact that it had on her physical health. She talked about working 16 hours a day while living in poverty and her eventual hospitalization:

And that was it, three days in the hospital. Three days in the hospital, lying there with steroids being pumped into me because my immune systems were compromised. Which was very interesting. There I was, getting sick helping people whose immune systems were compromised. I completely compromised my own, you know (Mala, individual interview).
Da also felt that political work had negatively impacted her physical health, noting that a kind of global exhaustion overtook her and eventually forced to her withdraw from many of her activist activities:

I was burnt out. I was getting ill...I realized that I just didn’t have that kind of energy anymore... I had had arthritis before but it got worse. There was actually a year when I had hepatitis A and... it was like a crisis. But... there was no stopping. So as time went on, it just began to be more and more apparent that I was getting more tired. It wasn’t any one thing. It was just like I was weak all the time and I just couldn’t get up anymore. And I think I was getting depressed quite severely (Da, individual interview).

Given the “seamlessness” of activism in the lives of the participants, one can imagine that leaving political work for health reasons could have a significant impact on other areas. A number of the participants talked about women who had left social justice work as “women who had disappeared” or “women who dropped off the face of the earth”. These comments reflected both the extreme isolation that often follows withdrawing from political activism and the shortcomings of lesbian organizing communities in supporting those who can’t or won’t “give it all for the cause”. As I noted in my interview:

It’s hard sometimes because... everyone you know, they’re all a part of it [the activist circle]. So, I think there have been times when... it’s actually making me ill, physically speaking, from being burnt out or whatever. But I feel like... it’s scary, ‘cause if you walk away, or take a break... you’re totally isolated. I mean, for lots of women, it’s our work, our friendship circles, where we find our girlfriends (laughs)... so... it’s hard to walk away from that even if... it’s killing you (Maria, individual interview).

Despite the emphasis on the negative causal relationship between political work and physical health, there were moments in the interviews where the participants noted the interconnection between *being politicized* and physical well-being. Chris talked about
the impact of politicization on physical health as positive while acknowledging the physical toll that activism took on our bodies:

In terms of the physical well-being, I don’t have that ulcer anymore. You know...there’s a freedom that has come from that, that sort of congruence and that coming out and not feeling scared all the time and...that has both a physical and mental impact, right? I mean, it’s both, you can’t separate it...the interplay between the two. Sometimes the activism, physically, oh, I often feel very tired, I mean I know that I sometimes think it’s time to, it’s time to let up on this and just sort of (laughs)...retire a bit, and have a holiday. So, there’s a place where... activism is hard work. It’s really hard work (Chris, individual interview).

I also talked about this in my interview, echoing Chris’ perception of health as holistic and connected to personal (and political) awareness:

I see a direct relationship between...claiming identity, becoming politicized and physical health...activism is another story (laughs) but you know, for me, I know there’s something to the fact that I was diagnosed with a sleep disorder...they told me I had narcolepsy. And what’s happened in my life as I...came out, dealt with some deep...issues... did some healing work, became a more integrated person. Doing that personal work...I think it’s related to becoming politicized. It effectively dealt with the sleep disorder! (Maria, individual interview).

This quote is particularly evocative given the nature of my (supposed) ailment, a disorder where one falls into sleep in an uncontrolled way. It seems an eerie (and ironic) metaphor for a lack of consciousness.

Disillusionment and Loss

In each of the interviews, the women I talked to spoke of the burnout, the physical exhaustion and chronic illness that often accompanied their social justice work. They also talked about the emotional toll it took, the sense of disappointment, the bitterness, the betrayal that they felt when their illusions of commonality and sisterhood were shattered. More than physical illness, it was the emotional pain we experienced that
made activism unsustainable, that made us want to “retire”, to “recover” from our involvement in social justice work. As Robin said:

Maybe it’s just that I’m so burned out on the complexity of dealing with [people]. Some people have skills, we all have crap in our backgrounds that we’re trying to get rid of, sometimes that plays out and it’s very stressful trying to do that work. And I know for me, I want to get away from that (Robin, focus group).

All of the participants noted that activists brought their personal pain and issues to political work and that the playing out of these issues was one of the key factors in burning out. Mala commented on the relationship between political work and personal healing, noting that it was personal issues that often interfered with women coming together in a “good way”:

I think it [activism] is [good for women’s mental well-being] but we have to remember when we’re doing community work, we’re dealing with other people, right? And people come to community work for different reasons. Some people come to community work running away from something, some people are running towards something, some people are trying to work out something, and I think that’s where it gets tricky because community work means negotiating with people and not everybody is negotiating with a clear, comin’ from the heart place, willing to listen and communicate place. I think that’s where the burnout can occur (Mala, individual interview).

A number of the participants noted that disappointment came when we were confronted with difference among us. Just as we felt disillusioned when our ideals of the community as “home” and “family” weren’t met, we felt let down and betrayed upon discovering divergent opinions among those we had expected were “the same” as us. In the focus group, Anne noted that we see ourselves as the same as part of the journey to individuality, noting the necessity of mirroring for personal growth. Nen and Da picked up this thread, relating it to their experiences of organizing with other lesbians of colour:

Anne: But I think we move into this kind of endless search for community because we’re looking to be mirrored... I feel that I’m always looking around for
lesbians who identify as butch.... when I find one, I wanna sit them down and I... and older lesbians who identify as butch.

Nen: Um hmmm.

Anne: Like, who are you? How do you think? How do you... how are you with your partner? Like, what is it about being butch that... I need that. I yearn for it. So I think that that's part of the coming out process...we look for family. We look to see how we are the same and then we can see where we are unique. But I think it's hard for people.

Group: Um hmmm.

Nen: Just to add on to that, to find the unique is sometimes a struggle when you're mirroring. That's what I've found is hard. You don't want to see them, other activists, as being any more different than those experiences you've already had in your life, like the ones that set you apart. You have so much more expectation of this person to mirror you, like they need to mirror you even more than someone who's absolutely totally different from you. That's what I've found to be the struggle in this work of activism. When you're in a community, the smaller it is, the more focused it is, the harder it is to work in. And that's where the disillusionment comes in. It's pretty much more painful than actually being ignored out there. Like you expect too much.

Da: ...The expectations among those you call your own, they're so much higher.

Nen: So much higher.

Although disillusionment and loss (of self, of utopian visions of family, of idealism) were key themes in both the interviews and focus group, the participants demonstrated a philosophical perspective on their painful experiences. Several of the participants saw these experiences as “learning”, as “healing”, noting that it was through these conflicts with other women that they became more aware and self-knowledgeable.

As Robin said:

Yes, it’s got its points that have helped me but it’s also got this other stuff. I don’t know if I could say percentages. Certainly working through the negative stuff that has happened has helped me work through a lot but sometimes it’s been incredibly painful. And I don’t think that people... I think I’ve met a lot of self righteouse activists that think ‘It’s my way or the highway’ but I don’t know...there’s healing in a lot of different places (Robin, individual interview).
Sustaining Activism

Being politicized doesn’t promote health because activism is work that we don’t actually value as work. We think it’s important that everyone should do it until you have a chronic something or an ulcer. We don’t look out for each other (Nen, individual interview)(emphasis mine).

Despite the participants’ emphatic assertion about the negative relationship between activism and physical health, we acknowledged that we are silent about this in the context of our organizing work. A number of the participants commented that the relationship between physical ill-health and activism is taken for granted, a given. This was seen to be “the way it is in women’s organizing” (Maria, individual interview).

All of the participants said that we had to develop strategies for sustaining our involvement. For some, it was making an effort to take “holidays” from their social justice work, although several of the women talked about this as an exercise in futility. A number of the participants talked about the importance of finding time for quiet reflection and the need to “get out into nature”. For others, it was integrating physical exercise and other preventative measures into their lives. Da, Chris and Anne talked about the centrality of their spiritual practice and the integration of this with their social justice work. For Mala and Robin, putting their energy into creative pursuits was the key to restoring balance and promoting health. Despite their individual efforts, the participants felt that support for developing self-care strategies was absent in activist circles:

I know so many people who do social change work and they are not healthy! They have migraines...they’ve had surgery, they’ve had things taken out. It’s kind of a running joke among some people that I know... I think you don’t notice it, for the activists in their 20s and 30s but the fact is, once we hit our 40s, we can’t hide it anymore and we need to be exercising and eating properly and stuff like that. And it’s not talked about. I don’t find it talked about in the circle (Anne, individual interview).
Creativity and Art

Two of the participants identified expressions of creativity as essential to both their continued involvement in social justice work and their well-being. In the interviews, it seemed that both Mala and Robin were trying to re-establish a connection to their art after periods of focusing on activism in a way that undermined their creative expression. Mala noted that she had spent a number of years trying to “do activism” in a way that didn’t necessarily support her other passions or her true vision:

I think part of my new path in terms of burnout and where I’m not wanting to go towards, what I want to do so it doesn’t go into burnout is doing stuff from a creative place... That’s where I draw my strength from so I’m just going to work from there versus trying to integrate myself into a pre-established organization rife with its karma and its key people... (Mala, individual interview).

Both Robin and Mala had made efforts to engage in social justice work of a particular kind, a variety that reflected the dominant understanding of activism. Their involvement was often at the expense of their art, something that both of them identified as sustaining and restorative.

I think that my coming out was around the same time that I stopped doing the art and starting doing the health activism and I think that... I think I needed the creative stuff as well as the activism, so that may be [it] (Robin, individual interview).

Robin said that her art practice gave her tangible products, as well as beauty. I noted in her interview that she seemed to contrast activism with art in the sense that one gave back something that you could call “a success” whereas in political work, the rewards were less tangible. Robin agreed that she didn’t see her involvement in political work as necessarily successful, noting that “particularly around the women’s health stuff in this city and in this province, I can’t say that I’ve seen very much [change]. So, it’s...
certainly the anti-imperialist stuff, we’re still fighting that, just under a different name” (Robin, individual interview).

For Mala, burnout and a profound sense of disillusionment had encouraged her to rethink how she got involved with activist projects. She talked about no longer following the orthodoxy of social justice work, approaching it in a way that was more authentic to her. This meant writing, and using the power of word for societal and personal transformation:

Poetry is like that, it touches people...and it tends to be a thing that people will respond to. And they can enter into a dialogue with one another through those things. It’s very healing and it’s opening in a non-threatening way...it’s not like “Oh, you haven’t read the right books then da da da da da...” right? And so, that’s where I’m wanting to work from. That place, which is an old place of mine. It’s my very first place (Mala, individual interview).

**Spirituality**

It’s not really the activism [that makes us physically ill]. It’s the activism without the support of some kind of physical and spiritual practice, a daily practice (Anne, individual interview).

I was surprised by the importance of spirituality in the lives of the participants. For the women I spoke with, spirituality was distinct from organized religion, although Chris did talk about her practice having its foundation in Roman Catholicism. All of the participants who focused on spirit in the interviews talked about their practice as sustaining them in activist work. Importantly, Da and Anne also talked about it as helpful in understanding the difficulties of community organizing.

Da found explanations for why organizing groups self-destruct (and in lesbian feminist organizing, why women “eat each other up”) in Shambala teachings and Buddhist practice. She talked about this as being related to the notions of activism as
micro and spirituality as engaged “out there”. Da believed that our daily interactions with others models our acceptance, or non-acceptance, of oppressive structures.

In Da’s experience with lesbian feminist organizing in the 70s and 80s, the dominant belief was that personal transformation would come through organized struggle against oppressive structures. She spoke about her disillusionment at the lack of success this strategy brought and the emotional pain she went through organizing with other women. While Da didn’t specifically name the catalyst for her getting involved with the Buddhist Centre, it seemed to be based in this profound sense of disappointment.

Da’s spiritual practice reflected a commitment to “building an enlightened society” (Da, individual interview) one person at a time, seeing personal transformation and spiritual growth as the foundation of social change. As she noted, this perspective is not always welcomed in activist circles:

Using whatever activism was, in some way, to work out certain things, or gain certain things that were not possible in that kind of situation...That’s the only route I’ve ever gone so I don’t know if there are other ways of learning stuff...you’ve got your own stuff and you need to look at that. But often, people are still saying things like ‘That’s indulgence, let’s look at the bigger picture’ (Da, focus group).

Both Chris and Anne echoed this, specifically in the focus group when they talked about what constituted activism. The emphasis on the micro, one’s daily ways of honouring people, was a reflection of their spiritual understanding of justice but was not the typical way of working in activist circles.

Spiritual practice was also something that participants saw as sustaining. Several of us talked about the importance of meditation, identifying it as an activity that enabled us to stay involved in political work. However, for all of us, these health-promoting
practices were something we had come to after years of activism, not something that was integrated from the outset.

"It's Just Not so Clear Anymore"; New Directions for Activism

When I first came out, and I was dealing with this political group, I would write stories. I had this whole series of stories that I was wanting to write about what would we do, who would we be, when the day came that our children would go 'What's homophobia, mama?' You know, it was all these stories that I was wanting to write and people were like 'That's just madness, right?' They were so caught in it. But I thought, if you don't have your dreamspace, then all you've got, really, is this enemy that you're grappling with...what are you gonna do when that enemy is outta there? ...What's your core coming from? (Mala, individual interview).

One of the key themes that emerged in this study was the instability of categories. We talked about our identities shifting over time as we came to new consciousness. We spoke about coming to claim identities, not just around sexual orientation, but around race and class as well. We struggled to reconcile this fluidity with our sense of the importance, and solidity, of these identities in our lives.

While we talked about the relevance of identity in organizing for change, we articulated the limitations of organizing around singular categories of identity. Several of the participants noted our feelings of invisibility within white lesbian feminist organizing, struggling to weave together the rhetoric of sisterhood with our experiences of alienation, racism and class-based oppression. Organizing with other women seemed, at times, like a see-saw tilting back and forth between joy and bitterness, home and betrayal, solidarity and isolation. As Anne noted:

...There's a way when you see your own community eating each other, and you see your own community supporting each other, there's a way that it puts me back in touch with my humanity and that of others. And in that, back in relationship with the 'us' and the 'thems' (Anne, individual interview).
In trying to reconcile such disparate emotions, we tried to think about models of organizing that would offer a more hopeful and integrated perspective. Our collective theorizing around new models of activism offered only tentative ideas. Despite the limitations of identity politics, the disillusionment wrought by the demise of our utopian visions, and the ambivalence some of us felt about our current involvements in activist work, we struggled to let go of our habitual ways of thinking about activism and identity.

Da noted that activism is different in our present historical context, when the lines between us are not so clear. Robin echoed this, stating that she had come to activism in a time of “us and them, good and bad” (Robin, focus group), a time when social justice work was simpler because the issues were more clearly defined and you knew who your allies (and enemies) were. We all agreed, yet we recognized that simplistic divisions fuelled some of the very exclusions we had experienced. The recent lecture by Angela Davis was brought up again towards the end of the focus group. It had been raised a number of times throughout, and had obviously made a significant impression on the participants. Nen noted the new direction for political work that Davis discussed at her recent lecture, telling the group:

One thing that Angela Davis said at the end was pretty... it stuck to me a lot and in this time and generation... she was talking about youth and the different generation that’s doing all the activism now. And she was saying something like we just need to really push our boundaries now... beyond what we did in the past, closing our boundaries inward in order to identify ourselves, even though doing that empowered us. And now we need to open them and push them a little farther (Nen, focus group).

Later in the discussion, Chris referred back to this, noting that Davis has been doing activist work through for many years and had witnessed the birth and evolution of
many social movements. Chris recognized a parallel between the movement away from identity politics that Davis proposed and our discussions:

I can relate to that in terms of the length of time that she’s been around and now...in her own personal journey, she’s come to this place and she’s saying...we don’t need to have these little enclaves anymore. Now’s the time to go out... you know, it almost fits with what we’ve been talking about in terms of that process so it’s interesting (Chris, focus group) (emphasis mine).

The group seemed to agree that this mirrored the processes we had discussed, both in terms of our individual narratives and the evolution of the movements we had been involved in. However, when I brought up the relationship to queer theory and asked about the political realities of organizing based on concepts of fluidity, several of us saw queer as too “slippery”, too “vague” (Maria, focus group) a concept on which to build a movement.

The majority of the participants didn’t embrace queer as an identity. Robin, Chris and Da questioned whether the identity didn’t resonate for them because of their age. Nen and I also felt that it didn’t fit, although we recognized that many of our peers embraced it. I tried to outline my misgivings about queer as an identity and as a movement, saying:

To me, it doesn’t have any emotional meaning... it’s very theoretical and even though it maps the process that we’ve been talking about in some sense, it doesn’t have any emotional resonance for me (Maria, focus group).

The participants’ responses were boisterous and emphatic in their agreement. Nen went on to say that the aims of queer theory were “cerebral”, stating that “there’s no emotion. There hasn’t been any movement, any revolution, no real politics” (emphasis hers). Unfortunately, this conversation took place towards the end of the focus group and we failed to explore it deeply.
In retrospect, I think our conversation reflects the oscillation between old ways of thinking about identity and organizing and new perspectives on political action. It reflects our tentative steps away from identity politics to an integrated model of organizing that gives us space to be all of who we are. Despite our awareness of the constraints inherent in building social movements based on collective identity, we were hesitant to let go of this as a model. While we moved towards deconstruction and tentatively stepped away from essentialist thinking, doing so seemed to challenge us. Coming to name ourselves was not simply a political act of resistance but a movement towards healing and integration; claiming identities enabled us to reject stigmatized, externally imposed notions of sexuality, race, class and gender and to embrace positive images of ourselves.

In contemplating the implications of this study for new models for political organizing, I realized that our discussions pointed to the breaking down of dichotomies; it wasn’t a matter of either/or. Our discussions point to a way of organizing that acknowledges the importance of multiple identities, a model that is based on an analysis of the relationship between oppressions, a framework that will enable us to work across difference without perpetuating exclusions or encouraging fragmentation.
Chapter 6
Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Work

Summary

The narratives of the participants weave a textured story about the relationship between identity, activism and well-being. They complicate the dominant understandings of marginalized identities (be that around race, ethnicity, class or sexual orientation), illuminating the role of stigmatized identities in personal transformation and societal change. In telling our stories, a complex understanding of identity emerged; much more than a site of shame, the names we claim for ourselves are often sources of strength, pride and power. Indeed, “Outsider” status brings gifts and enables particular, critical perspectives on self, community and society.

The participants contested dominant bio-medical discourses, articulating an understanding of physical and mental health as socially determined. The meanings of well-being that emerged challenge scientific models of health, offering instead a nuanced and holistic vision of wellness that is grounded in social and political contexts. Political consciousness and activism were identified as key determinants of both physical and mental well-being. Acting in resistance to oppression increased our sense of personal power. It provided us with greater meaning and purpose, decreased isolation by involving us in collective efforts and provided opportunities for personal growth. However, our involvement with social justice work came with a price; although organizing was beneficial to our mental well-being, our activism was often at the expense of our physical health. In a sense, a trade-off was made between our physical health and
our involvement in political work, something that supports our sense of connection, purpose and power.

This exploration of the relationship between identity, activism and well-being highlights the difficulties we face in doing political work in a way that honours all of who we are. It acknowledges the barriers to claiming integrated identities and to shifting power relations in a movement which foregrounds our (presumably shared) sexuality and obscures oppression based on class, race, disability and gender. While acknowledging the personal ease and political advantage (for some women) of organizing around stable identities, we must push ourselves to disrupt these categories and examine the ways in which their maintenance perpetuates exclusions. Recognizing the limitations implicit in utopian visions of lesbian community, we can work towards an understanding of solidarity that is not dependent on sameness. Disputing our conflation of community with an idealized image of “family”, we would see that our connections with other activists are inevitably about “alliance and opposition, friendship and alienation, support and betrayal” (Phelan, 1994, p. 74).

This study also illuminates the difficulty of doing social change work in a way that is sustainable, for both individual activists and collective movements. We must support one another in our commitments to social justice, encouraging balance and defying the expectations of “giving it all for the cause.” We must challenge stereotypical definitions of activism, directing our gaze to the micro, to the day-to-day ways of being that promote social change. Developing an expansive definition of activism will enable us to reconceptualize what we see as political work, and may offer new ways to think about organizing.
We need to support each other to be healthy, to complement our political work with spiritual practice, creative expression and physical exercise. Doing so will ensure that there is continuity in our organizing community, providing us with opportunities for teaching and learning across generations of social change workers. Pushing the boundaries of conventional wisdom, in lesbian health and activism, will enable us to see ourselves (and others) in more integrated ways and to find new, less oppressive strategies for working across the lines of difference.

**Recommendations for Future Work**

I remember once, talking to somebody...about change and my life, and I want it right now! I mean, Maya Angelou said “I am the hope and dream of the slave” and that’s so real to me, in light of my great grandmother and my history, you know. And I think, yeah, maybe not in my lifetime, but it wasn’t in her, my great grandfather and great grandmother’s lifetime either (Mala, individual interview).

This research speaks to change and new directions in both research and practice. The narratives of the participants highlight a number of silences within the existing literature on lesbian health, queer theory, social movements and identity politics. These gaps are indicative of the places where our understandings need to be broadened, our theories complicated and our assumptions challenged.

The exploration of the connection between resistance and well-being points to new directions for lesbian health research. Acknowledging the impact of oppositional consciousness on women’s resilience provides a new framework for thinking about the health of marginalized communities. Furthermore, the meanings of health and illness, outside of a bio-medical framework, seem to be a rich area for further study. Key to this is enhancing our understandings of the social determinants of health and placing our investigations of wellness in a larger political context.
While this thesis bolsters the queer and postmodern project of destabilizing identity categories, it also points to the importance of identity in our daily lives. As some of the participants pointed out in the focus group, the decentring of identity politics mapped our own individual processes; reflecting on our personal histories, we came to question stable notions of identity, challenge dichotomies (such as either/or, us/them), and acknowledge our own process of claiming identity. However, we also articulated the power of identity in transforming our lives and talked about the healing and strength that came through our refashioning of stigmatized identities. These narratives complicate the constructivist project by offering something in between essentialist identity politics and the unsettling goals of postmodern and queer theories. Again, it is that in between place, the space between dichotomies, that needs to be fleshed out.

This study raises a number of important methodological considerations and highlights new directions for exploration. Conducting research within and across one's own community poses challenges for the researcher; it raises questions about reflexivity and ethics and provides an opportunity to explore the effects of multiple roles (researcher/participant/friend/collaborator) on the research process. Investigating close to home generates a fascinating subtext, a whole other set of data. It is an innovative approach to knowledge production and one worthy of further study.

Developing New Models for Oppositional Struggle

This research generates insight into the practice of social justice work. While the social movements literature informs our understanding of the whys and hows of movement birth and evolution, it says little about the nuts and bolts of political organizing. When I first got involved in social justice work, I was taught the ropes by
women older and more politically savvy than I. While the political education I received has been helpful, the pedagogical process within lesbian feminist activism reflects the taken for granted assumptions within that movement, assumptions that do not support sustainable activism or encourage well-being.

Throughout this project, we often talked about the relationship between activism and physical ill-health in a fatalistic way; there was a peculiar acceptance about the link between doing political work and developing chronic, stress-related illnesses. While individual women were able to adopt restorative, health promoting strategies for self-care, we struggled to envision altering the culture of activism itself. Further critical exploration of the links between activism and well-being are needed, with particular attention to developing models of social justice work that promote both physical and mental health.

In a sense, this study can be seen as evidence of both the enduring power of identity politics and their demise. The narratives of the participants speak back to the rhetoric of sisters in struggle, highlighting the places where our hunger for sameness has silenced the particularity of experience. Our words also give voice to the importance of naming ourselves and claiming identity, even if the names we choose are temporary, and the identities, shifting. When we made the leap from our micro, individual processes to collective, macro-focused action, we struggled to translate our understanding of the instability of identity into a political practice. Further research is needed to explore the applicability of queer and postmodern theories to political action and social movements. This will mean exploring the tension between the instability of identity and its solidity in
daily life, between our ambivalence towards community and its emotional resonance, between our need for sameness and a respect for difference.
Appendix A

Consent Form

Cultures of Resistance: Lesbian Activists, Politicization and Health Promotion in Vancouver, B.C.

I am exploring the connections between lesbian identity, politicization and wellness among lesbian activists in Vancouver. Many lesbians play an important role in social justice struggles and are active in health related movements such as the women’s health, HIV/AIDS, and queer rights movements. I am interested in talking to lesbian activists like yourself to learn more about how lesbian activists perceive and describe the links between their identities, their activist work and their mental and physical well-being.

I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences as a lesbian activist. I would like to do this individually and then in a group interview with five other women. Both the individual and group interviews will last two hours, for a total of four hours. With your permission, I will tape record the interviews. No one will have access to the taped interviews except myself and the tapes will be coded (with numbers, not your name) and kept in a locked cabinet in my home. I will not use your real name in the study.

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to ask me. You may refuse to participate, choose not to answer any particular question or stop the interview/withdraw from the group interview at any time. A meal will be provided at the group interview but no monetary compensation will be provided for either the individual or group interviews.

This research is for the completion of a Masters of Arts degree in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of B.C. The faculty member supervising my research is Dr. Deirdre Kelly (822 3952). If you have any concerns regarding your rights or treatment as a research study participant, you may contact Dr. Richard Spratley, Director of the UBC Office of Research Services and Administration, at 822 8598.

Thank you,

Maria Hudspith
I agree to participate in both the individual and group interviews and acknowledge that I have received a copy of the consent form for my own records.

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signature                          date

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print name
Appendix B

Individual Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me a bit about when you first began to identify (privately/publicly) as a lesbian? Can you tell me a bit about your coming out process?

2. How do you think that your process of claiming this identity was shaped by your involvement in community work (i.e., feminist organizing, other kinds of political work with women)?

3. Do you consider yourself to be an activist? What does that identity mean to you? If not, how do you see your involvement in social justice issues?

4. What types of community organizing do you do? How has your involvement in political work shifted over time? What kinds of things have affected those shifts?

5. Are you involved in activism around a number of different issues? If so, what is there a connection between these multiple issues?

6. How did you first become involved in community organizing? (location/context-personal, historical, political)

7. Can you tell me about the key points in your process of becoming politicized?

8. How has your involvement in community organizing been influenced by your identity as a lesbian? Why do you think that so many lesbians are active in social justice movements?

9. Would you say that being an activist has had a positive impact on your mental health? Physical health? If so, what is it about being politicized that you think has been "good for you"?

10. Can you tell me about times when you felt you needed a break from your community activist work? Why was that? Are there times when you feel that your activism has had a detrimental impact on your mental well-being? What about your physical health?

11. What fuels your work as a community activist?

12. What sustains you in your activist work?

13. Do you have anything to add?
Appendix C

Focus Group Discussion Guide

I developed a series of questions for the group discussion. They are intended as a guide, not as a way to rigidly structure our conversation. I wanted to use the focus group as a forum to check out some of my preliminary interpretations from the interviews so some of the questions are in reference to the themes that came out of those individual conversations.

1. In the interviews, many of you talked about activism differently. Some of you said you felt ambivalent about the term “activism”. Is there a more useful way of thinking about the different types of social change work that you do?

2. We also talked about different definitions of activism (activism for self, for the community, for others, activism for pay). Where do you think that these definitions come from? Why do you think that certain forms of activism are seen as more legitimate?

3. What do you think motivates women to become politically active? Do you think we are drawn to political work because of a sense of homelessness? A sense of not belonging?

4. What role did the need for community or a sense of home play in you becoming an activist? Once you got involved in political work, did you feel like you had found what you were searching for? Does this sense of community or culture promote your sense of well-being?

5. What do you think the relationship is between our need for “home” and the sense of disillusionment that many of you talked about?

6. Do you see any benefits coming from your identity as a lesbian, woman of colour, working-class woman or other identities? What are they? What is the relationship between these identities?

7. A lot of political work seems to depend on people coming together around a particular identity (i.e., feminism). In your own experience, are clear categories of identity necessary for political mobilization? What are some of the problems that you’ve experiences in organizing around identity?

8. What do you think about “queer theory” and the movement to break down the notion of identity as solid and stable? What are the implications of that for political organizing?

9. A number of you spoke about the phenomenon of “trashing” and how dysfunctional group dynamics in activist communities were a reason for pulling
back. A lot of times, we also pulled back because of experiences of oppression within lesbian activist circles. Do you think that difference among lesbians an obstacle to political activism? or is it the illusion of sameness that eventually undermines activist communities and pushes us away from activism?

10. A number of you talked about activism as being “seamless”, “like breathing air” yet you also acknowledged that having little separation between “life” and “activism” often resulted in ill health. What are the strategies that might enable you to do activist work in a healthier way?

11. Some of you talked about how activism wasn’t good for your health but that being politicized was. Can you tell me a bit more about the distinction?

12. A number of you spoke about the importance of some type of spiritual practice in sustaining you. In some ways, there seemed to be a journey from becoming politicized to getting involved with activist work to experiencing some of the difficulties we’ve talked about and spirituality becoming more key at that point. Can you tell me a bit about the distinction between spirituality and religion? What are the links between social change work and spirituality in your lives? Do you feel that there is a language to talk about spirituality in activist circles?
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