

**Streets, Strangers and Solidarity:  
A Study of Lesbian Interaction in the Public Realm**

By  
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A dissertation  
submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Sociology  
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Winnipeg, Manitoba

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**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of  
Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree  
of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to countless people-- family, friends, acquaintances and strangers for their diverse roles in contributing to the energy of this undertaking.

I want to thank the scholars that comprised my Ph.D. committee. I consider it nothing short of a miracle that Lyn Lofland, whose ideas are so essential to my work, agreed to be the external reader. Janice Ristock contributed her expertise on the gay/lesbian/queer literature and, critically, her understanding of the dynamics of lesbian communities. Karen Grant's fastidious editing skills and high methodical standards have been an enormous asset. Raymond Currie has shared with me his genuine commitment to social research and his boundless knowledge of urban sociology. With humour and kindness, Douglas Rennie used his remarkable organization skills on many drafts, helping to shape my, sometimes chaotic, ideas into a coherent dissertation.

I could have searched the world over and not found as fine an adviser as Daniel Albas. As my mentor, he has inspired me to see, record and make sense of "the richness of life." Working with Daniel's limitless theoretical knowledge, interactional astuteness and infectious fascination with sociology has changed my life. It is my goal to follow in the footsteps of Cheryl Albas and Daniel Albas in contributing to the spirit of the symbolic interactionist tradition. The intellectual and emotional support that Cheryl and Daniel have given me through all the stages that it takes to write a dissertation has turned what could have been an arduous process into an exciting adventure.

I extend gratitude for all the sisterly solidarity that inspired and created this project. In diverse ways, the energy of many lesbians is behind this work. Thirty-eight finished my questionnaire, although it was, in the words of one participant, a "beast of a survey." Several read drafts of my thesis, helping me to see that these were not merely the ideas of an isolated abstract thinker. Radclyffe's excitement about the project and passion for being visible with me on the streets of many cities sparked the recruitment process and brought life to my fieldnotes. Countless lesbians contributed in more fleeting manners. As I talked to lesbian strangers on city streets I have discovered the solidarity I seek to explore.

The contributions of my family to this work cannot be described, so I will not try. Certainly having a philosopher father and an English teacher mother has pushed me to think critically and to write coherently. Elly-Jean Nielsen, my daughter, probably does not remember a time when I was not working on what, years ago, she termed "Mom's Disorientation." Her sense of humour and her unwavering confidence that I would eventually get the job done have helped me to always keep it in the right perspective.

### **Abstract**

Through an ethnographic investigation of the lesbian subculture, this study explores the ways that solidarity is produced between lesbian strangers in the urban public realm. Using data collected from participant observation, self-administered qualitative surveys and interviews, the social interactional dynamics occurring on streets and other public places are detailed, beginning with the most minute interactional rituals and moving on to more enduring social engagements. The production of inequality and exclusion on the street level is also investigated. The results of the study emphasize the importance of stranger engagements in urban environments and highlight the need to become critically aware of the often taken-for-granted rituals and strategies that occur in public places. The dissertation is based on the theoretical proposition that nonintimate social actions have profound repercussions on more intimate groups and on social structure.

## Introduction

Through an interactive study of the lesbian subculture, this dissertation attempts to elucidate the role of urban public spaces and the meanings of social interaction within those spaces. The social scene is the urban public realm: the world of the streets, sidewalks and strangers. As “quintessential social territories” (Lofland, 1998) public places are ideal laboratories for studying social interaction. Several sociologists have noted that the public realm is the site of solidarity rituals.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the dramaturgical awareness of the lesbian subculture, this study explores the strategies, tactics and interpersonal negotiations that create solidarity between lesbian strangers in public places.

The theoretical proposition that the small-scale social actions of everyday actors play a large part in creating social structure underlies this dissertation. Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration utilizes Durkheim’s theory of religious rituals combined with Goffman’s analysis of public realm rituals (i.e., the cult of the individual). Simply put, the theory of structuration postulates that the everyday rituals performed by people in public places, recursively enacted, create and recreate the social structures that characterize a society. Those social facts, experienced by individuals as constraining and coercive, are created from an intricate system of ritualistic social interaction in which individuals participate as part of their everyday routines.

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<sup>1</sup>The work of urban sociologists of the symbolic interactionist persuasion captures the essence of this quality of the public realm as a pivotal social arena in the creation of human solidarity.

<sup>2</sup>Giddens (1984) refers to this, often unconscious, activity as practical consciousness. I will refer to it as prediscursive knowledge to capture the essence of this knowledge as existing in the realm between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Episodes of social interaction, called by Goffman "encounters," provide the tightest of situations to study in that they typically involve only a few people using a modest amount of space over a brief period of time. Studying face-to-face situations allows the researcher to capture social action as it occurs, but it is far from a simple process. The social action that takes place in public places is notoriously difficult to scrutinize sociologically. As routine behaviour, these actions often occur below the level of consciousness.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, it is easier to study the public behaviour of "deviants," because, by definition, the interaction rituals and strategies enacted by them stand outside established norms. When a group must deal simultaneously with two social worlds, one which contains potential risk and danger, and the other which is an outsider culture, interaction is often more consciously strategic. A strategic consciousness is often developed by outsiders which serves to highlight the dramaturgical qualities of their behaviour and gives them an advantage in verbalizing that behaviour and putting it into a larger perspective.

Although the focus of this study is on the customs, patterns and rituals engaged in by lesbians in the urban public realm, it also examines the spontaneous and unpredictable qualities of these interactions and the conflictive aspects of public realm behaviour. Assuming the significance of space as an empirical variable, the study explores the spaces carved out and shared by lesbians as, through social interaction, they create territories, both real and imagined, in a predominantly heterosexual (and heterosexist) urban world.

Over the last four decades the literature on lesbian issues has grown. While earlier work on the topic tended to be ethnographically rich, recent work has tended to

be more theoretical and political. The present study endeavours to return to an ethnographic approach, armed with the cumulative knowledge of the subculture that the last four decades has revealed. In taking a critical stance on the issues raised in this study, I assume that efforts to provide a critique of the nature of heterosexist society and to discuss lesbian issues have created an exciting sociological opportunity: to explore what lesbian issues reveal about the larger society.

Dramaturgy is well suited to a study of the public realm. Dramaturgists study the strategies used to create social reality and the manner in which the interaction order is sustained dramatically on the front stage. In sociology, an overwhelming quest for “whys” has left the “hows” underdeveloped (Lofland, 1976). A dramaturgical study of the lesbian subculture will elucidate the manner in which the “hows” and “wheres” of public realm encounters highlights the “whys” of social interaction. A focus on strategies is fundamental to understanding the meaningful world of public encounters and will provide a way of deepening our knowledge of that social world.

The plan of the dissertation follows the logic of a symbolic interactionist perspective, moving from the micro to the macro. Chapters One and Two outline the theory and methods. Chapter Three delves into the heart of the subject matter, exploring lesbian social interaction in the public realm, beginning with the most fleeting actions and building to more enduring ones. Chapter Four addresses the structural and contextual factors that influence lesbian social interaction and explores the concept of “outness.” In Chapter Five, urban spatial issues are investigated as they relate to the lesbian subculture and social interaction. Chapter Six explores the dynamics of community and how public social interaction affects the lesbian community.

## **Chapter One: Theoretical and Conceptual Issues**

To set the stage for the present study, it is necessary to introduce some conceptual concerns from two very significant sociological areas. The first is the study of the public realm and non-intimate sociality (focusing on the dramaturgical literature). The second is the research on lesbian subculture and community (focusing on interaction in public).

### **1. The Study of the Public Realm**

Historically, sociologists have overlooked and often misunderstood the nature of the public realm and the interaction that occurs within that social sphere (Lofland, 1998). While sociologists from different perspectives have agreed on the significance of social interaction to human existence, many have failed to recognize that forms of interaction differ in the various social realms. In part this is due to focus. Social scientists have tended to centre their empirical and theoretical efforts on interaction that occurs in private and semi-private places (in primary and secondary groups). More fleeting and less intimate encounters, the ones occurring in public places, have been overlooked and undervalued (Lofland, 1990).

There is a deep-seated ideology in both common-sense knowledge and academic discourse maintaining that intimate and lasting bonds are superior to bonds of a more secondary and impermanent nature. Uncritical acceptance of this ideology, has led sociologists mistakenly to view the concept of stranger interaction as an oxymoron (Lofland, 1990). If the public realm is viewed as devoid of personal bonds, it follows

that it lacks meaning sociologically. While these ideas can be traced back to Tonnies' (1887) loss of community thesis, they made their way into sociology through the works of early Chicago School theorists. The following quote sums up the attitude toward public realm encounters that historically has influenced sociologists and is reflected in the general public's attitudes towards urbanite interaction.<sup>3</sup>

On the street, in the subway, on the bus [the city dweller] comes in contact with hundreds of people. But these brief incidental associations are based neither on sharing of common values nor on a co-operation for a common purpose. They are formal in the most complete sense of the term in that they are empty of content. (Spykman: 1926:58; quoted in Lofland, 1990:178)

This anti-urban sentiment is based on, and reinforces, the assumption that people in cities (urbanites) suffer from "stimulus overload" (Wirth, 1938) and experience "psychic shutdown" (Milgram, 1970) resulting in a "blasé attitude" (Simmel, 1950). The belief is that due to the vast subcultural complexity of the urban lifestyle, city dwellers lose the sense of moral obligation that people in smaller places take for granted (i.e., norms of civility and a communal attitude). Urban space, then, has been traditionally viewed as populated by anti-social people who, at best, ignore each other and, at worst, care little about the welfare of the fellow human beings with whom they share urban space.

A small collection of scholars has attacked this notion of the "primacy of the primary" (Lofland, 1990). These pioneers in micro studies of urban interaction (e.g., Erving Goffman, William Whyte, Jane Jacobs, Gregory Stone and Lyn Lofland) have shown that public places, far from being interactional wastelands, are the sites of a rich

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of the anti-urban attitudes that pervade public opinion and scholarly work, see Lofland (1998).

and dynamic social life. Often through ethnography, these scholars have undermined the pervasive belief in the emptiness of city interaction. They have done so through detailed descriptions and explanations of the richness of interactional life occurring precisely in those places claimed to be devoid of interpersonal dynamics (e.g., subways, buses, streets, cafés and parks). They show that, rather than representing a mere agglomeration of alienated individuals, public places in cities are indeed places where moral cohesion and solidarity are created and recreated on an everyday level.. Yet, despite the efforts of these ethnographers, there remains a patronizing attitude in sociology which views the detailing of life in the public realm as “a trivial pursuit...mildly entertaining but only as a temporary diversion from intellectually weightier matters” (Cahill, 1994: 4).

Some of the misunderstanding of the public realm is based on pure oversight. A disregard for the importance of public realm interaction has led to empirical neglect. However, there is also a degree of conceptual confusion that should be addressed. Lofland (1994) suggests that many sociologists have attempted to study the public realm by applying the principles of social interaction that are found in more intimate settings. The result is conceptual and methodological confusion because researchers do not recognize the influence of the character of space as an independent variable.

In this study, which places a heavy emphasis on the links between space and interaction, delineating the character of the various social realms is clearly important. Lyn Lofland, drawing on Albert Hunter (1985), distinguishes between three ideal types of social realms. All contain differing densities of relationship types (i.e., stranger, acquaintance and intimate). Types of activities, relationships and interaction rituals

differ depending on the realm in which an encounter takes place. The three realms are: the private realm, the parochial realm and the public realm. These qualitatively distinct social arenas have features which make them identifiable. Lofland (1998: 26) points out that,

...holding constant the larger cultural milieu, each of these three realms has its own characteristic normative principles or rules of the game. What is expected and appropriate behaviour in one type of social territory is not necessarily expected and appropriate in the others.

It is useful to break down these three realms into identifiable characteristics. The most important factor is the type of relationship, or social bond, which predominates. As Hunter (1985:232) points out,

...mutual knowledge of particular others with whom one interacts within each type of social bond decreases from private to parochial to public. The combined cognitive and affective components are adequately expressed in the social typology, intimate, acquaintance and stranger.

The private realm is characterized by ties of intimacy among primary group members who are located within households and personal networks (Hunter, 1985). The parochial realm is characterized by a sense of commonality among acquaintances who are involved in interpersonal networks located within communities or workplaces.<sup>4</sup> The parochial realm can be a street neighbourhood or a workplace or any other social group of a more secondary nature (e.g., a political group). Relationships within this realm are goal directed. People know each other mainly as acquaintances and sometimes as friends.

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<sup>4</sup> Lofland notes that most classic ethnographies of city life are actually studies of the parochial realm. Urban ethnographers have explored the world of neighbourhoods, kinship groups and friendship networks in detail. As Lofland states "disattention to the public realm is quite reasonable, given the long tenure of the belief that nothing social or nothing socially important, happens there" (1998: 22).

The public realm is the world of strangers and the street. It is that part of the social order in cities where people relate to each other mainly as fellow citizens. The fact that strangers predominate does not mean that intimate or acquaintance alliances do not exist in the public realm but that the dominant form of relationship is that of stranger. In a world in which lines between public and private have become blurred and there is an increasing privatization of public spaces (Lofland, 1998), it is not easy to define public realm. According to Goffman (1963), public spaces are any region in a community freely accessible to members of that community. Public spaces

refer to those areas of the city to which, in the main, all persons have legal access...the city streets, its parks, its places of public accommodation...its public buildings or... "public sectors" of its private buildings. (Lofland, 1973: 19)

For the purposes of studying the lesbian subculture, the public realm will include all areas of the city which are theoretically accessible to the general population. Public spaces not only include streets, sidewalks, parks and plazas but also stores, bars, malls, coffee shops and other freely accessible places that may be, at times, more parochial (e.g., streets within neighbourhoods or public spaces that have become more privatized such as gay bars). Temporary public spaces such as concerts and street festivals will also be considered as public spaces.

The knowledge that people possess of each other varies in the different social realms. The public realm is the world of strangers and the street. It is that part of the social order in cities where people relate to each other mainly as fellow citizens. In public spaces, knowledge of another is mainly categorical rather than based on more intimate details. "Categorical knowing" is Lofland's term for "knowledge of another based on information about his roles and statuses...That is, one knows who the other is

only in the sense that he can be placed into some category or categories” (1973:15). Categorical knowing differs from “personal knowing,” which occurs in more private and parochial realms. According to Lofland, personal knowing involves knowledge of another’s personal life, even if one has never been close to the person. One may know a person’s name, what she does, or whether she has children even if there has been no personal contact with her. With personal knowing, one does not have to rely solely on the information that can be gleaned from assessing another’s status. Personal knowing characterizes the private realm; categorical knowing characterizes the public realm. In the parochial realm, we find a combination of personal and categorical knowing.

Living in cities is only possible because people work to reduce the strangeness and anonymity of the experience. This “interactional labour” (Goffman, 1983), so habitual it is almost invisible, involves complex processes, strategies and tactics. These dramaturgical tactics of people in public spaces are rich and varied. People automatically engage in processes of categorization in order to define situations and give them meaning. This categorization process is not limited to lesbian interaction in public places; it is a universal phenomenon. Beginning with the work of George Herbert Mead, symbolic interactionists have recognized the human impulse to label others with whom they interact (i.e., to take the role of the other). This role taking process enables social actors to understand how to act toward individuals and thus to assign meanings to the social situations they encounter. With respect to the lesbian subculture, Ralph Turner’s (1990) concept of “role-making” is highly relevant. The idea of role making shifts the emphasis from the practice of simply enacting and

reacting to prescribed roles to the much more unpredictable process of creating and modifying roles as social interaction unfolds.

Interaction is always a *tentative* process, a process of continually testing the conception one has of the role of the other. The response of the other serves to reinforce or to challenge this conception. (Turner, 1990: 87)

According to Turner, social actors constantly devise their performances in social interaction in order to behave “as if there were roles” (1990:86). This process of discovering identities and roles out of the chaos of the social world gives form to the social interaction.<sup>5</sup> An examination of lesbian social interaction, as the study will show, brings to light this highly creative process of role making.

People are impelled to cast each other into roles, then, in order to know how to act towards each other. Lyn Lofland (1973) argues that there is a strong impetus in urban society towards “making strangers routine” or “ordering the urban populace.” These processes are very complex, especially in cities where most of the people we encounter will not be known personally. Lofland has broken down the procedures of urban ordering into three basic categories: *apparential* ordering, *spatial* ordering and *behavioural* ordering. These ordering concepts are highly relevant to a study of lesbian interactional engagements and will be explored in detail. I will introduce them briefly.

*Apparential* ordering allows individuals in the public realm to gain a great deal of information about the strangers they encounter because it permits them to place each other using cues from the other person’s appearance. Goffman (1959) discusses these processes at length in his concepts of “*impression management*” and “*presentation of*

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<sup>5</sup> With respect to lesbians, “role-making” is more accurately referred to as “identity-making.” The same processes are relevant when placing people into identities as when placing them into roles, although identity making may be more complex in the case of identities that are less visible.

self.” When people encounter each other in public spaces, they intentionally and unintentionally present cues that allow others to read their identities. The cues used in ordering strangers’ identities appearentially are endless and complex: clothing, hairstyles, body presentation, facial expressions, special markings (e.g., tattoos) and so forth. Placing people accurately, in the case of deviant or marginalized subcultures, requires a certain amount of insider knowledge as well as a good grasp of general societal stocks of knowledge. Normally only gays and those heterosexuals who are “wise” are aware of lesbian subcultural coding.<sup>6</sup> Appearance coding, as I will show, is a deeply significant interactional ritual that has taken on a complex shape in the modern lesbian subculture. How we read lesbian identities based on appearance reveals important processes in the creation of lesbian communities and also points to some exclusionary practices that exist in those communities.

Spatial ordering has become increasingly significant in modern cities where public space has become more specialized and heterogeneity more masked (Lofland, 1998). Spatial ordering entails using cues from physical location and more subtle spatial indicators. It involves discerning information about strangers based on cues gleaned from knowledge of the spaces they occupy. These cues are complex and, as urban geographers point out, involve a plethora of social dynamics based on race, gender, class and sexuality. Becker and Horowitz (1971) have argued that a “culture of civility” is created in cities due to the fact that people understand the spatial orderings of cities and use this understanding to guide their interactions within various parts of the

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<sup>6</sup> “Stocks of knowledge” is a phenomenological concept (Schutz, 1970). Being “wise” refers to someone who is outside the subculture in terms of membership but who understands the subcultural stocks of knowledge (Goffman, 1963). In the lesbian subculture, wise individuals are those who are not gay themselves but have picked up on gay coding through knowing gays intimately.

city. Most modern urbanities have an intricate understanding of the spatial ordering of their cities but this spatial knowledge varies, of course, based on the identities of individuals. In the study of marginalized subcultures, spatial indicators are highly significant because marginalized people engage in processes of territorialization as they find ways to carve out spaces in which to build identity and to resist marginalization. The strategies of spatial ordering engaged in by lesbians, as stigmatized people, are complex. This complexity will be explored in detail as I examine interaction in both general public spaces and within so-called gay and lesbian spaces.

Behavioural ordering is another crucial variable for studying the interactional tactics of any marginalized group, especially when it is possible for individuals in the subculture to "pass" as "normal" (Goffman, 1963). Behavioural ordering involves identifying people based on cues gleaned from their behaviour. As the present study will show, these behavioural cues can be so subtle that they can be described as intangible. An intricate grasp of behavioural cues is therefore necessary to categorize lesbian behaviour. Lyn Lofland (1973) points out that appearance and spatial cues are more easily grasped than behavioural ones. The meaning of any behaviour is dependent on the identity of the actor being read and, of course, the space in which the reading occurs. However, in any deviant subculture, behavioural cues are crucial variables, used in conjunction with other cues in defining situations.

People in public places employ an endless variety of strategies and tactics, some ritualistic and others more conscious, as they make sense of the chaotic world of strangers and mutually negotiate their social worlds on an on-going basis. This study draws upon some previously discovered symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical

concepts in order to highlight the specific situation of lesbian public realm interaction. Lesbians are a unique group, however, and their interactional strategies have not been extensively studied. Thus new concepts are emerging. Beginning with the processes of categorization and building up to the processes of space and community creation, the study examines, in detail, the actions of lesbians in public places and the meanings of those actions both individually and collectively.

## **2. The Study of The Lesbian Subculture**

In her discussion of the historical and present study of non-intimate social interaction, Lofland (1990: 194) puts out the following call for research:

[P]erhaps our greatest challenge is to undertake studies that will help us to understand the differences historical and cultural (and subcultural) variations make in how nonintimates interact, how they feel about their interactions, and what patterns of bonding their interactions produce.

Studying urban non-intimate “patterns of bonding” in the lesbian subculture, I have found that Lofland’s call for research is timely indeed. With respect to the literature on lesbian subculture, there is little deep and detailed research on this subculture’s interactional rituals and episodes of public realm social engagement. Certainly there is no research or theoretical discussion that attempts to tie urban interactional patterns occurring in public places with the larger social structures that lesbians create. Public realm strategies of lesbians, then, have received only passing reference in the literature on lesbians in general. Likewise, non-intimate lesbian encounters have received only minimal attention from symbolic interactionists and dramaturgists.

It appears that both a heterocentric and androcentric bias pervade the literature. While there is a substantial supply of work on gay men in public places (e.g., Chauncey, 1994; Gardner, 1994), the literature is sparse with respect to lesbians and public spaces.<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that there is no relevant material. While systematic investigation of the phenomenon of lesbians in public spaces is lacking, bits and pieces of information on lesbians and their public realm strategies can be found dispersed throughout the general social scientific literature and in the popular press.

The social scientific literature on lesbian identity, subculture and community has grown steadily over the last three decades. The earliest systematic sociological work came out in the mid to late 1970s, as the gay rights movement gained momentum and more writers became interested in the topic. The work during this time period, at least in sociology, is probably the most ethnographically detailed to date. Drawing on interviews and observations in specific (often unnamed) cities, several ethnographers addressed complex issues such as the development of lesbian identity in a homophobic world, stigma and secrecy, coming out and forming political alliances (Warren, 1974; Ponse, 1978; Kreiger, 1983).

A useful ethnography is Carol Warren's (1974) study, Identity and Community in the Gay World. Warren uses symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical sociology to examine the ways that gay people build identity in a homophobic society. The difficulty with Warren's study is that it is heavily biased towards the experiences of gay men, even though it claims to be a study of both gays and lesbians. Her subjects included several hundred men and only a few dozen women. However, Warren's work

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<sup>7</sup> I suspect that this is, in part, due to the fact that men are viewed as more public than women and because the history of gay cruising in public places has received attention from many interested social scientists.

is an improvement over previous literature on the gay community, which often makes no mention of lesbians at all. A number of dramaturgical concepts in Warren's work are theoretically useful to a study of lesbians in public places (e.g., destigmatization techniques, territorial invasion, passing, fronts, roles and strategies of secrecy). Other ethnographies that are specific to the lesbian subculture (e.g., Ponse, 1978; Kreiger, 1983) tend to be less detailed dramaturgically, although they provide important theoretical insights into the forming of lesbian networks and the workings of lesbian primary groups.

In the 1980s and 1990s the focus shifted from general ethnographic explorations of the deviant life-worlds of lesbians to broader issues around lesbian (and often feminist) politics.<sup>8</sup> While this switch may have led to a loss in terms of symbolic interactional richness, it did bring about a clearer understanding of the marginalization of lesbians in heterocentric society. There are two general areas that emerged from this more political literature. One explored lesbian experiences in heterosexist society, covering an array of substantive areas. These studies were often micro in orientation but strove to highlight macro issues such as societal level sexism and heterosexism. The topics in these works ranged from an examination of lesbians in the workplace or academy (Ristock and Taylor, 1998; Cruikshank, 1988) to the study of lesbian domestic life (Johnston and Valentine, 1995; Elwood, 2000). One well-developed topic area in lesbian studies has been the exploration of lesbian relationships; how these relationships are affected by homophobia and how the issues faced by lesbians differ from those of

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<sup>8</sup>This change in focus can be viewed as a natural shift. The earliest work on lesbian subculture represented a fresh area of study with all the excitement of new discovery. As lesbians came out in larger numbers, they started addressing their own issues in more detail and, as an oppressed group, they began to apply a political analysis.

gay men and heterosexuals. Such issues as lesbian parenting (Weston, 1991), sexuality (Loulan, 1990; Calfia, 1982), caregiving (Aronson, 1998) or violence and abuse in lesbian couples (Ristock, 1998) are also addressed. Thus some of the themes that were raised in the earlier, more general, ethnographies have been developed in greater detail over the past three decades.

One of the best examples to illustrate this increasing complexity is the study of lesbian identity. The concept of lesbian identity has become progressively more multifaceted over the last few decades as the subculture has splintered with the growing number of lesbian groups based on differences in interests, politics, age, race and social class. In the literature, lesbian identity and identity politics are explored in relation to a host of issues such as the effects of community on identity (Kreiger, 1983), coming out (Jenness, 1992), style (Stein, 1993) beauty norms (Cogan and Erikson, 1999), race and ethnicity (Lorde, 1984; Anzaldua, 1990) and even bisexuality (Esterberg, 1997).<sup>9</sup> With respect to many areas of the study of lesbian existence, then, there has been a growing body of literature and with it the debates deepen and divisions develop.

A second area has focused on lesbians as they organize politically. These discussions explore not only the influence of heterosexism on the formation of lesbian institutions and politics but also the unique quality of these organizations and the micro dynamics within them. Lesbian political organizations such as activist groups (Taylor and Whittier, 1992), and lesbian cultural establishments such as bars, coffee houses, cooperative bookstores and music festivals have been the focus of such studies. In

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<sup>9</sup> A list such as this one cannot do justice to the vast areas now covered in the study of lesbian identity. The purpose of the brief list is to give an impression of the vastness of topics related to the issue of lesbian identity in order to illustrate the way this literature has grown over the last few decades.

Canada, Becki Ross (1996) developed an institutional and historical analysis of lesbian feminist organizing via complex networks of political and cultural institutions.

While the positive benefits of political organizing and culture building are found more often in these works, there is also a growing awareness of the debates and tensions in lesbian identity politics. For example, Ross details the debates and divisions that have developed around sexuality in the Toronto lesbian community. Other writers have critically explored identity problems inherent in the lesbian desire and quest for community (Kreiger, 1983; Phelan, 1989; Stein, 1993; Lorde, 1984) and have suggested that a political focus in lesbian subcultures has resulted in repressive communities.

In the last few decades, another body of work, often only incidentally related to politics, has grown significantly. These studies and theoretical discussions (in a variety of academic disciplines) describe the various lesbian subcultures. Steadily since the 1970s, following the feminist and gay rights movements, there has been a fragmenting of the larger lesbian community into a variety of subgroups. All draw on what Polchin (1997) refers to as a gay "collective memory" including common traditions, customs and argot and thus there are customs and rituals that cross-cut all the various subcultures. However, as the subcultures within the larger lesbian world diversify, sub-cultural traditions have arisen.

Of most use to the present study's focus on the public realm strategies are those research efforts which attempt to describe the different subcultures in depth, explicating as much micro detail as possible. While this research on lesbian subcultures rarely takes the form of ethnographies in the tradition of symbolic interactionism, it often contains useful details. Writers have discussed such diverse subcultures (or ideological

groupings) as butch-femme (Nestle, 1987; Kennedy and Davis, 1993; Morgan, 1993), neo-butch-femme (Faderman, 1992; Jeffries, 1989), lesbian separatists (Hoagland, and Penelope, 1988), lesbian feminists (Ross, 1996), lesbian sadomasochists (Calfia, 1982) and queer nationalists (Ingram et al., 1997). Furthermore, diverse topics are explored that are indirectly relevant to lesbians in public spaces such as trends in lesbian fashion and beauty norms (Stein, 1989; Cogan and Erikson, 1999), gender and the performance of lesbian roles (Weston, 1993; Butler, 1991; Esterberg, 1997) and group norms and standards (Esterberg, 1997). These writings are useful in that they often contain detailed descriptions of rituals, styles and customs of the different lesbian subcultures along with some of the tensions and conflicts within those subcultures. It is possible to glean some information on public realm interaction and symbolic interactional behaviour generally from these reports, even if a systematic social psychology is lacking.

Several articles from various disciplinary perspectives discuss lesbian coding strategies (Webbink, 1981) or non-verbal behaviours engaged in by lesbians, although there is no mention of public places as a variable to be considered. For example, Laude (1993) argues that "lesbian coding" has been a survival strategy for lesbians and that lesbians have developed a high level of awareness of non-verbal behaviours. Lesbians, she argues, draw on an abundant array of non-verbal cues in recognizing each other (e.g., eye contact, body rhetoric, mannerisms and stance). Laude's discussion of the power of non-verbal coding behaviour is on the right track, but her paper, based on interviews with six lesbians from one geographic area, is methodologically restricted. As well, the paper is limited to a description of a few basic non-verbal cues and does

not make any attempt to generate concepts or theories. However, the insight Laude gained from a small sample and select focus suggests the potential for a more thorough study of these strategies.

Other studies and theoretical discussions make superficial reference to concepts around lesbian coding but stop short of any analysis of how these strategies guide social action. For example, a recent volume of Lesbian Studies (Cogan and Erickson, 1999) is dedicated to examining lesbian beauty norms. Many of the articles bemoan the exclusionary tendencies of lesbian stereotyping. Underlying their complaints is an understanding of the fact that social action flows from these exclusionary coding procedures but no systematic analysis of how more intricate strategies grow from these coding behaviours is offered. What the actions of coding reveal about social behaviour in public places has yet to be explored by sociologists.

Despite the lack of coherent theory that connects lesbian social engagement with social structure, there are many descriptions of various lesbian subcultures. It is useful to provide one example of the symbolic richness of a lesbian subculture. The history of lesbian subcultures indicates that, dramaturgically, lesbians are often experts at handling the symbolic systems in two separate universes, gay and straight. Looking back to the 1950s, we find a lesbian subculture that evolved into an elaborate symbolic system even before the lesbian community was as subculturally complex as it is today. This subculture, known as the butch-femme underground, pervaded the pre-liberation lesbian community (Nestle, 1987; Kennedy and Davis, 1993; Morgan, 1993). The butch-femme subculture has never completely disappeared as an elaborate symbolic system, although its meanings have shifted and changed through the decades.

Although butch-femme as a lesbian subcultural system dates back further, by the 1950s butch-femme interaction rituals had taken the shape of a lesbian institution. Specific sexual codes, styles of dress, distinct mannerisms, a bar-based culture and strategies for dealing with police and public realm harassment had developed. Understandably in this culture, as in other stigmatized subcultures, a strong ethic of secrecy produced unique cultural rituals and patterns. In order to be visible to each other (i.e., to know whom to trust or with whom to make sexual connections) in such an oppressive atmosphere, lesbians created symbolic practices and interaction rituals that would be recognizable only to other gay people. However, there was also an omnipresent risk of exposure due to the strong butch/femme aesthetic (Nestle, 1987).

As part of their subcultural rituals, lesbians labelled themselves as butch or femme and based their presentation of self on these labels which entailed sexual styles, clothing, stance and other symbols that served to identify each other in public places.<sup>10</sup> Lesbian communities based around the distinct and erotic codes of butch-femme provided safe places for lesbians to celebrate their sexuality. However, lesbians had to be careful to balance the need to be visible to each other with the need to conceal their identities if necessary. The streets and other public places were important for lesbians during this time period and recognizing each other in the public world was an empowering strategy. Nestle (1987) argues that the rituals of recognition and social interaction, developed so elaborately in the 1950s, are still very much a part of the collective heritage of lesbian communities. That is, notwithstanding the changes in the

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<sup>10</sup> Note that the identities of butch and femme are more complex than the adoption of masculine and feminine roles by lesbians but they do related to gender issues (see Nestle, 1987).

lesbian community, the cultural and interactive practices of butch-femme have been sustained, although they also have transformed over time.

Historically public places have been crucial for lesbians when private and parochial places contained a high degree of risk. One last area of research that is relevant to this investigation, then, is the study of urban spaces. Beginning in the 1970s, again focussing on gay men, the idea of gay territories has been explored by sociologists and urban geographers (Levine, 1979; Murray, 1979; Castells, 1983). As a strategy of resistance, gays (and lesbians vicariously) have engaged in struggles for the appropriation of urban spaces. These spaces range from bars and parks to whole streets and neighbourhoods. The last decade has witnessed a surge of interest in spatial dynamics with respect to gays and lesbians. The study of gay space has highlighted the link between the social processes that form both personal and collective identities and the symbolic significance of space (Forest, 1995).

The importance of spaces for marginalized people is colourfully illustrated in the growing body of literature known as “queer theory” where “space” has become a trendy buzzword. Indeed, the exploration of the uses of space as a strategy of resistance is not new. Lyman and Scott (1970) noted over three decades ago that deviants engage in processes of creating “free territories” where deviant identity can be recognized and celebrated. The interactional and dramaturgical strategies that go into building these spaces, however, are lacking coherent and detailed description in the recent literature. With respect to this shortcoming, this study will explore connections between the interactional strategies engaged in by lesbians (i.e., recognition and acknowledgement) and the dynamics of spatial negotiation (i.e., creating lesbian territories).

## Chapter Two: Method

The following discussion outlines the methodological details of the study. The chapter is divided into five sections. The first describes the general method of the study. The second addresses sampling issues. The third outlines the data gathering techniques. The fourth discusses links between sampling, data gathering and conceptual ideas. The fifth summarizes the methods of analysis.

### The Study

The study draws on a combination of traditional and innovative qualitative methods. The general approach to the subject material is ethnographic in its attempt to gain detailed knowledge about a specific urban subculture. Lofland and Lofland (1995) stress the importance of taking an activist stance in ethnographic exploration. They point out that in an activist ethnography two kinds of questions are explored. The first studies the type of social situation and the second investigates the strategies employed in dealing with that social situation. The situation in the present study is lesbian interaction in the urban public realm and the goal is to elucidate the strategies lesbians use individually and collectively as they negotiate their realities *as lesbians* in a heterosexist social world.

As a symbolic interactionist researcher, my goal has been to develop “intimate familiarity” with the situation of lesbian social interaction in the public realm. To be intimately familiar with a sector of social life is to have “easy, detailed, dense acquaintanceship with it based on free flowing and prolonged immersion” (Lofland,

1976:8). Intimate familiarity is more easily achieved when access to the research setting can be “said to come naturally” (Albas and Albas, 1998). As a lesbian who is interested in urban social interaction generally and the lesbian subculture specifically, this topic is clearly a natural one for me. Access to research sites and to participants has therefore been based on my insider status.<sup>11</sup>

In an effort to gain as accurate a perspective as possible, I have used several methods of obtaining data on lesbian interaction in the public realm. I have combined written reports (surveys) with observation (fieldnotes) and informal interviewing (face-to-face and e-mail). Using three different approaches has strengthened the study by offering several empirical stances. The study deals with actions that are often unconscious and guided by thoughts that exist at the level of prediscursive knowledge. It is important, therefore, that several techniques are used for accessing these thoughts and behaviours. While blatant actions can be captured through observation, actions that are subtler are best captured through written reports. Those that are most subtle can be elicited in engaged and interactive discussion. Having access to visual, verbal and written data, then, has added to the validity of the study.<sup>12</sup>

The study took place over a two year period. I began taking fieldnotes over four trips to Minneapolis before formally starting the study in the spring of 2000 when I received ethics approval from the University of Manitoba Ethics Committee (Appendix 1). Some of my fieldnotes come from those experiences but I did not give out the

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<sup>11</sup> Fred David (1973) has discussed access to field settings by distinguishing between “martians” and “converts.” He argued that the Martian attempts to explore a situation by standing outside of it and seeing it with “strange eyes.” The convert, by contrast, makes sense out of a situation by becoming immersed in it.

<sup>12</sup>In qualitative research, triangulation (multiple methods) allows the researcher to counteract threats to validity (Hammersely and Atkinson) and allows the strengths of one technique to compensate for the weaknesses in another (Denzin, 1978).

survey in Minneapolis. Throughout the study, I cite passages from my fieldnotes as a lesbian interacting in public places in Winnipeg, Toronto, New York and Minneapolis. The lesbians I encountered through fieldwork represent a larger age range and racial composition than those who formally completed the survey. I talked to lesbians aged 19 to 69 and discussed the study's issues with black and aboriginal lesbians. Although these informal interviews make up the background of the study they are not quoted or discussed directly. Only participants who signed the consent form (Appendix 2) are directly referred to or quoted<sup>13</sup>

Thirty-eight lesbians completed the survey instrument. Twenty participants were from large urban centres, (10 from New York City, seven from Toronto and three from Vancouver). Another 13 were from medium sized cities (10 from Winnipeg, two from Ottawa and one from Louisville). Five participants currently live in small towns (including one from a small town in Australia), three of whom have at some point lived in a large city. Ethnicity was of a larger range than race. Twenty-seven identified themselves as white or WASP, seven identified as themselves Jewish and another four hyphenated their ethnicity (one Asian-American, two Italian-American and one Italian-Canadian).

Social class background of the survey participants was varied. Five identified themselves as upper middle class, 19 as middle class, nine as lower middle class and five as working class. Many respondents stated that they came from a certain family background but that their social class as adults has since changed. The most common

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<sup>13</sup>The participants who filled in the survey signed a consent form, which protects their anonymity. They have agreed to allow their responses to be quoted in any written report (see Appendix 2). The information letter gives participants all the contact details they need, assures confidentiality and informs them that they can withdraw from the study at anytime (see Appendix 3).

change was from middle class to lower class, however a substantial number have risen from working class roots to the middle class. Ten of the participants have children. About half are living as couples and the other half are presently single. Their ages ranged from 21-59, the average age being 34.

I have used several techniques to deal with respondent validation. In any ethnography the aim is to establish a correspondence between the member's view of their social world and the concepts created in the analysis (Hammersely and Atkinson, 1983). One member check technique I used was keeping an on-going e-mail dialogue with respondents. As concepts have emerged, I often e-mailed respondents or approached them face-to-face to discuss these concepts. As a second member check, I have given the participants the opportunity to read the report and, in fact, several have commented at length on drafts. Although these discussions have raised many interesting questions, at no time have any of the participants seriously questioned the interpretation of the data that I have offered and all have been extremely supportive and excited by the ideas I share with them. A final validation technique I have used involves my role as participant observer. As a lesbian urban sociologist my interest in this topic is ongoing and active. Any chance I get I engage both gays and heterosexuals in discussions about this topic. Informally, these discussions have served as a validation procedure. I have discovered the keen interest in my topic and that lesbians have supported the "sensitizing concepts" (Lofland and Lofland, 1995) arising from this research.

## Sampling

My insider status was pivotal to the method of obtaining participants for the study. I relied on snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is an excellent method for locating and recruiting research participants in a marginalized community for several reasons. First, networks based on the marginalized status tend to be dense and word of mouth communication is a powerful recruitment tool. Second, in a group that perceives itself as oppressed, there is often an instant solidarity (or political astuteness) among members even when they are strangers to each other. This political impetus is very conducive to an attitude of willingness to help. When asked to do the survey many lesbians I approached responded with: "Sure I'll help you out," or "I am glad someone is doing this research," or "I know other lesbians that will help you out." Even when they did not get around to answering the questionnaire, they were very eager to help out the cause.

I began with a flyer (Appendix 4) announcing my research project. It started with "attention lesbians" in bold print and ended with my picture. My intention was to create a sense of urgency with the "attention lesbians" and also to foster trust with the addition of the picture.<sup>14</sup> The flyer was carefully worded to be inclusive, create a sense of political importance and to encourage in potential participants the desire to talk about topics related to their own issues and subculture. The flyer was posted in urban lesbian venues such as coffee shops, books stores, bars and newsletters.

Although a study of this size cannot offer generalizations, I wanted to sample a number of cities to gather information from a range of urban environments. I posted the

advertisement and gave out the flyers in three North American cities (Winnipeg, New York City and Toronto). The majority of lesbians in the study (27 out of 38) were recruited from the three cities in which I was able to engage in participant observation and post the flyer. Snowball sampling, however, ensured that I ended up with participants in other cities (Ottawa, Vancouver, Louisville) and several small towns.

The most unorthodox, but theoretically valuable, aspect of the study was the manner in which I enlisted participants for the study by approaching strangers on the streets or in other public places. After making an initial reading of their identity (“ritual recognition”) and engaging in mutual identity validation (“ritual acknowledgement”), I approached lesbians and asked them if they were interested in participating (“spontaneous engagement”).<sup>15</sup> About half of the participants were sampled using this technique of public realm engagement; the rest came through the postings or word of mouth from other participants.

The sampling technique of spotting and approaching lesbians in the public realm raises several concerns. The first is risk. The risk involved in asking a stranger to engage in a study with a potentially stigmatizing topic is obvious. I will discuss the ways that I reduced this risk later. The matter of inclusiveness is also clearly an issue in that the study would be biased towards “out” (or visible) lesbians if only women I recognized as lesbians were asked to participate. This problem is dealt with by snowball sampling. Through snowball sampling and the posted advertisements I

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<sup>14</sup>The fact that I am almost always read as a lesbian by other lesbians was another reason for the picture. I felt I needed to put potential research subjects at ease and I knew they would be more likely to feel comfortable agreeing to participate if they knew a lesbian was doing the research.

<sup>15</sup>Heterosexuals often express surprise at this apparently forthright approach and often pose the question: “How do you know it is a lesbian you are approaching?” However, the majority of lesbians do not find it surprising at all because they are aware of the subtle recognition strategies they draw upon in reading stranger’s sexual identities.

received surveys from lesbians from a range of “outness” levels; some out in all aspects of their lives and others more closeted. However, this study is limited in its access to the perspectives of severely closeted lesbians who would not likely be willing to participate in a study such as this one.

I have assumed a simple definition of lesbian as any woman who claims that identity. I use the term lesbian out of convenience but acknowledge that it is problematic. I asked the participants how they defined their sexual identity and why they chose the terms they did (see Appendix 5). The majority of participants referred to themselves as lesbian. The second most common label was dyke. A small number used the term gay and a smaller number preferred queer. Several found that they had changed their identity labels over time. I found some interesting connections between identity labels and race/class/politics as well as outness levels. The topic, which is not explored in detail here, calls for more systematic investigation.

### Data Sources

#### 1) Participant Observation

As a lesbian researcher, I am both subject and object of the investigation. Such a situation creates a useful methodological perspective in that my own experiences, observations and reflections serve as reflexive data. Participant observation, a methodological approach of symbolic interactionist researchers (especially those studying the public realm), has been a crucial and on-going technique in the study. Participant observation is an excellent methodological technique for picking up subtle nuances in social interactional behaviour that may be difficult for people to describe in

interviews or surveys. Keeping an on-going journal of my experiences as I participate in the public realm of cities as a lesbian has added a dimension to the data. As an active observer, everyday phenomena such as minute social interactional exchanges with other lesbians in public places have been closely scrutinized, recorded and analyzed. Throughout the study, these observations have served to develop the original ideas, to inspire discussion, to guide the changing of questions and strategies, and to stimulate ideas for analysis.

In a study such as this one, where my own experiences serve as data it is important to consider the public identity I present to the world. The impact of the identity and presentation cues of the researcher has too often been disregarded in those studies that endeavour to examine public realm interaction. All social interaction begins with mutual readings of identities. These readings, so automatic they are often unconscious, play a key role in guiding social action in public places. The trajectory of the study has, no doubt, been influenced by the way strangers read my presentation of self. As a visible lesbian, the social interaction I engage in and observe surely takes on a different quality than if I were not a lesbian or did not look like a lesbian. As will become evident in the discussion, statuses like race and social class guide interactions with strangers. The fact that I am a white lesbian, for example, no doubt accounts for the overwhelming whiteness of the participants in the study.

The strength of dramaturgical ethnography lies in its emphasis on grasping what lies below the surface of known culture. It involves cutting through the "thick undergrowth of habit and local custom for genuine knowledge of what goes on in social interaction" (McCall and Simmons, 1966:1). Dramaturgy attempts to go beyond

describing and explaining what Spradley (1980) refers to as “explicit knowledge.” Explicit cultural patterns are those behaviours that are easy to recognize by researchers and easy to discuss by informants. The lesbians in my study were clearly experts at naming and discussing the explicit cultural symbols, codes, rituals and behaviours of both their subcultures and the dominant heterosexual culture.

What makes studying social interaction so difficult is that the information that people in a culture (or subculture) use to get by in the world is also based on “tacit knowledge.” Tacit cultural codes are in substantial part non-discursive. They consist of the rules and information that allow social actors to “go on” in the routines of social life. This prediscursive knowledge is the information that cannot easily be recalled or verbalized because it often remains outside our conscious awareness.

Much of what goes on in the public world involves tacit knowledge. Therefore in order to verbalize many of the concepts explored in the study, participants have had to delve deeper than explicit knowledge and draw on their tacit knowledge. For example, when I ask the participants how they know another woman is gay, their explicit knowledge might contain cues that even a heterosexual can pick up (e.g., she is holding the hand of another woman). The participants often describe tacit knowledge more vaguely but are able to provide insight into the nature of these cues when probed. These are cues that the majority of heterosexuals will not pick up. Fortunately, marginalized people are often keen to discuss issues relating to their subculture and work hard at naming the tacit patterns of that subculture. For lesbians, being aware of these processes has been connected historically to survival and safety, as well as to the

creation of community. The study, therefore, is full of detailed information about the kinds of actions that people often take for granted and only rarely verbalize.

## 2) Self-administered Surveys and E-mail Interviewing

The challenge of the project was to draw from participants the tacit knowledge described above while gaining a solid descriptive analysis of their experiences as lesbians in the public realm. To this end I created an interactive survey instrument (Appendix 5). The questionnaire was designed to stimulate thinking on the subject of lesbian interaction in the public realm. Through the questionnaire I communicated with the participants almost as if I were conducting an interview. Wording was carefully selected to make clear my intent in asking the questions. This survey was designed to lead the respondents into deeper reflective thinking. In order to avoid superficial responses, I suggested that participants take time to reflect on the questions or to talk them over with friends.<sup>16</sup>

The questionnaire is designed to prod the participants to think about some of the ways they recognize and respond to other lesbians in public places. Many of the questions are dedicated to this phenomenon. The survey also asks questions about outness and other contextual variables. It contains a whole section on urban public places and issues related to lesbian spaces in cities. I have tried to treat this project as a collaborative effort. The respondents have played an active role in redesigning the survey. As completed surveys came in I used these in revising and refining the next group of surveys. For example, several participants suggested additional questions.

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<sup>16</sup>One of the most rewarding aspects of this work has been the way that my study has inspired lesbians to talk about the topic. Lesbians have told me that the survey sparked prolonged discussions with friends.

Other times I found that questions were often skipped or appeared to be confusing. Appendix five illustrates the version of the survey that most of participants received. Although participants have added questions and I have dropped some questions that did not appear useful, this has not affected any of the areas where I refer to frequency of response. If I do refer to frequency, it is only with reference to those questions received by all participants.

When a participant agreed to take the questionnaire, communication on the topic began immediately. Most participants preferred e-mail as a way of communicating about the questionnaire after they received it. Some of them also preferred to receive the questionnaire through e-mail instead of regular mail and sent it back the same way. The majority, however, took the survey I sent to them and composed their answers by hand, although they continued to correspond with me through e-mail. As the survey was demanding, I found I had to stay in constant contact with participants or risk losing the less dedicated (or perhaps more intimidated) ones. Sending encouraging e-mails was therefore a data-gathering tactic I used to inspire the participant to think about the topic, delve deeper into the subject matter and complete the survey.

The use of e-mail added a dimension not originally anticipated. In using e-mail to fortify the survey, the limitations of survey research in general (e.g., limited space, low return, difficulty getting in-depth responses) can be greatly reduced. For example, when I wanted to develop a question in more depth, e-mail questions generated an exceptional response rate. An example of using e-mail correspondence to add a question to the survey occurred as follows: In New York City, when I stopped a couple of lesbians on the street to tell them about the study, one of the women said: "*Oh, you*

*are researching lesbians and urban spaces. I hope you have a question about why lesbian bars suck"* (24 year-old rock singer and songwriter, New York City). Of course, I didn't have that question on the survey but when I sent out an e-mail letter humorously relaying the question to my collection of participants, I got back a slew of answers alerting me to the fact that the lesbian bar is a significant spatial and interactional concern.

The use of e-mail as a way of communicating with participants has made the study's time/space issues relatively unproblematic. E-mail makes it easy to communicate with strangers, as it provides an easy way to stay in contact with someone met through a fleeting encounter. The first couple that I approached simply took the flyer and smiled at my partner and me. Later, through e-mail correspondence, I learned how excited they were about being recognized and approached by lesbians on the street, even though the initial contact had been fleeting. We later discovered that we had gone to the same restaurant for lunch and that both couples had engaged in excited conversation about the survey. My partner and I talked about the expanding possibilities of the research while the couple to whom I had given the flyer talked about being spotted and doing the survey. One of the women wrote to me a few days later asking for the survey.

*My partner and I were crossing Broadway and 14<sup>th</sup> street (west corner across from the Virgin superstore) when you spotted us. She had just put her arm around my shoulders and I wrapped my arm around her waist. You gave me (us) your flyer and we read it over brunch at a nearby noodle shop. Both of us actually live on the upper east side of Manhattan (which is tragically devoid of out lesbians, even though we KNOW we are not alone!).*  
(32 year old ticketing manager New York City)

I continued to be in contact through e-mail with this participant and several months after she had sent in her survey I told her I was coming back to do more research in New York city. She wrote me the following excited e-mail in return.

*I would LOOOVE to get together with you next visit!! This survey has been wonderful for me and I feel truly blessed to have been "out" enough that day for you to have spotted me.*  
(32 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

E-mail allowed the participants to contact me easily if they had an experience they wanted to add after they have sent in the survey. Many participants said that the process of answering the survey heightened their awareness of their engagements with other lesbians in public places. Hence, they often wanted to contact me when they had an experience that made them think about the project. The following e-mail arrived from a participant six months after I received her survey.

*I think about you every time I see a dyke-I don't-know-on-the-street. In fact, just the other day I saw two middle aged dyke tourists in conservative blue blazers and khakis. I sat directly opposite them on the subway and they seemed to acknowledge my presence. I smiled to them, asked if they needed any particular tourist info but they said no.*  
(44 year old bartender and student, New York City)

Throughout this project respondents have sent me messages by e-mail when they have encountered situations that made them think of the survey. As will become evident in the discussion, the encouragement of critical reflection that this project has engendered contains both methodological and political possibilities.

### Connections Between Sampling, Method and Theory

The most original characteristic of the study is the way participant observation is tied to recruiting, leading to links between method and emerging concepts. By handing out the flyer to strangers, I have employed some of the very principles I am studying

and sparked social action that has led to further data. The study's arena is the public realm and the focus is on the dynamics of stranger interaction. Directly confronting and engaging with strangers ties method to subject matter. The method, therefore, has created data which has led to the formation of the ideas and concepts raised in the study.

The act of handing out flyers to lesbians in public place creates an unusual social situation. This act of breaching a norm purposefully has been called "Garfinkling" (Albas and Albas, 1998). It is a methodological tool invented by Harold Garfinkle (1967). Garfinkling involves the unconventional manipulation of a situation in order to make visible, by the reaction, a conventional pattern or norm.

Stopping strangers on the street to ask them for directions is not breaching any norms, as this is an acceptable form of stranger interaction. Stopping strangers to ask them to participate in a study is pushing the boundaries of what is viewed as normal public behaviour. Stopping a stranger perceived to be lesbian and asking her to engage in a lesbian study involves not only a breach of conventional norms but also a breach of the lesbian subculture's norms of subtle identity validation. In a heterosexist society, raising issues of deviant sexual identity involves risk beyond the normal risks involved in breaching civil inattention and therefore is a particularly blatant form of Garfinkling. However, the situation also creates a fascinating arena for the observation of social reality negotiation in process.

Substantively, these actions of breaching norms of stranger propriety were revealing. One would suspect that, in a heterosexist society, any social encounter that reveals a marginal sexual identity would be a serious breach. I found, however, that a visible lesbian stopping lesbians to ask them to participate in a study creates an

interesting situation. A norm is breached, as this is not an everyday occurrence, but the social fabric is quickly mended by a sense of solidarity created by the lesbian nature of the encounter. The existence of a shared marginalized identity generates a unique definition of the situation. This definition worked to my advantage because it sparked instant communication in which the parties involved drew upon a common subculture, reducing the strangeness of the situation.<sup>17</sup>

That lesbians share a subcultural meaning system enabling them to breach norms of stranger propriety became clear through the sampling process. On several occasions when I approached lesbians to discuss the study, I found myself drawing in other lesbians not originally part of the targeted group. For example, my partner and I were visiting a lesbian-run cooperative bookstore in New York City to distribute the flyers. We approached a group having coffee, offered the flyer and began to discuss the research. The discussion grew and revolved around such issues as whether I intended to include transgendered people, a sizable aspect of the gay subculture in New York City, and what terminologies I should use to be inclusive of “dykes of colour.” On our way out the door, as we paused to post the flyer on the bulletin board, a lesbian who had been reading alone in the corner approached us. She said she had overheard the discussion and was interested in the research. Her exact words were *“Hey where are you two from? I really want to talk to you for a long time, I love you guys. Do you have some time?”* (36 year old freelance personal manager, New York City). In this “spontaneous encounter,” I acquired a New York City lesbian for my study who was

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<sup>17</sup> One strategy used was humour to break down the “strangeness” and reveal a common bond. One lesbian I stopped said, laughing, “Oh you are a lesbian from Canada. How legitimate!” Another said, when I described my study as being about “lesbians in space”; “You are doing a study on lesbian astronauts?”

inspired by my project and happened to be in the mood to discuss the topic for “*a long time.*” An hour-long discussion followed on a variety of topics from racial issues among lesbians (the participant had just moved to Harlem) to the interactional dynamics focussed on in the study. This is only one of many situations in which I found myself gathering data arising out of social engagement with strangers in the public realm.

Clearly the act of approaching strangers and discussing lesbian issues with them is not a normal public realm occurrence as became evident by the way that humour and other devices were used to reduce embarrassment and by the initial surprised reaction of the interactants. Significantly, however, the embarrassment or shock was short lived and did not lead to a deterioration of the encounter. What became evident to me was the fact that the lesbians I stopped were excited by the rare opportunity to have their reality be dominant. The sense of solidarity created was powerfully revealed through the sampling process. As a lesbian participating in these social engagements, I became aware of the strategies and tactics I used to build solidarity with other lesbians just as I observed the way others used these strategies in creating a lesbian reality. The participant observation opportunities created through the sampling process, then, were integral to the quality of the empirical data.

### Analysis

In the tradition of symbolic interactionism, my approach to the research has been inductive and exploratory. I entered this project with only vague ideas about the situation of lesbian interaction in the public realm. As a visible lesbian myself, I have been exposed to these interactional strategies for almost 20 years. As a symbolic

interactionist sociologist, I have been fascinated by social interaction since I entered graduate school a decade ago. I have also had a growing interest in the field of urban sociology and have been studying urban sociology/geography, particularly work on the connections between urban space and social interaction. However, I did not anticipate the depth of the data I would encounter nor did I anticipate the concepts that would emerge from analysis of that data.

After two years of gathering data, the three sources of data (surveys, fieldnotes and interview notes/e-mail transcripts) were subjected to qualitative analysis. The analysis technique I used resembles the constant comparative method outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The constant comparative method is an approach to data analysis in which incidents are coded, categorized and compared in order to discover typologies, concepts, categories and theories. However, "grounded theory" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is a more formal approach than suited my research data. Following the more open methodological suggestions of Lofland and Lofland (1995), I used the technique of developing "disciplined abstractions" from the coded data. Developing disciplined abstractions is a process which results from "intimate familiarity." Through immersing oneself in the data, the researcher looks for "generic and generalized types and aspects of situations and strategies" (Lofland, 1976:62).

Disciplined abstractions, then, must be closely tied to the episodes of interaction under study. In creating disciplined abstractions from the experiences of lesbians in the public realm, I have alternated between the data and the emerging concepts. As I have done so, I have discovered both variations (e.g., anomalies) and consistent patterns. As

I discovered these, I have attempted to achieve a labelling of the behaviour, ideas, and strategies observed and recorded.

The presentation technique I use is direct quoting. However, it should be noted that some participants are quoted more than others are. This situation is due to the fact that writing styles varied so much on the surveys. Some participants wrote paragraphs of text. These surveys, of course, are easy to quote. Other participants answered in point form and are thus less quotable. However, their responses are equally important and have been used throughout the analysis. I also received more data, of course, from the 20 participants with whom I stayed in contact through e-mail discussion.

The following chapters outline in detail the results of my analysis. The layout reflects my determination that the concepts (disciplined abstractions) reflect the participants' experiences by presenting these conceptual ideas interspersed with quotes from the participants who answered the questionnaire and from passages from my fieldnotes. Lofland and Lofland refer to this technique as interpenetration; "the continuing and intimate alternation of data and analysis" (1995: 165). In presenting the concepts, then, I draw heavily on the words of participants but acknowledge that the ideas created from this data are my own interpretations based on my own perspective.

### **Chapter Three: Forms of Lesbian Interaction in Public Places**

This chapter provides details of public realm encounters between lesbians beginning with the most fleeting and routine, and leading to more spontaneous and lengthy interactional interchanges. The chapter is organized into four sections. The first, "ritual recognition," reveals the ways in which lesbians recognize each other in the public realm using the concepts of categorical knowing outlined in the theory section. The second section, "public expression," dramaturgically explores lesbian presentation of self. The third section, "strategies of acknowledgement," details the rituals engaged in by lesbians after recognition has taken place. The fourth section, "spontaneous expression," explores the more unpredictable contacts that occur between lesbians in public places.

#### **1. Gaydar: Ritual Recognition**

##### **The Concept of Gaydar**

In defining situations in public places, people habitually place each other into identities and roles. On the surface, the categorization of strangers into roles appears simple and automatic. Ralph Turner (1990) has shown, however, that role-making entails a continual testing process that renders this practice less predictable than it might appear. Lesbians are in a unique position with respect to role-making for several reasons. First, due to the heterosexual norm in the larger culture, the complex set of codes lesbians draw upon in placing each other's sexual identities are known only by other gays and the few heterosexuals who are wise. A peculiar situation exists, then, for

lesbians in the public realm. In the presence of heterosexual (and often homophobic) strangers, lesbian public realm engagements are often completely unobserved by heterosexual strangers in close proximity. Secondly, because lesbian identity is largely invisible and stigmatized, the role-making processes they enact are less habitual than the processes of role-making that take place between strangers assessing more conventional roles.

The coding behaviour that takes places between gay people in the public world has been playfully named *gaydar* by the gay/lesbian subculture. *Gaydar* is a play on the word *radar*, referring to a gay person's ability to detect a person's sexual identity almost as if the gay person has a sixth sense. The concept of *gaydar* captures a complex process of signalling and receiving. These processes describe a unique form of interactional negotiation. The raw interactional materials of *gaydar* provide the foundation upon which all the concepts of the study are based.

*Gaydar* involves typifications. The typifications that lesbians draw upon to tag each other are more intricate than heterosexual ones but they nevertheless rely on stereotyped images. Stereotyping has a double edge. It is used by lesbians to assess identity, guide social interaction and create solidarity. Stereotyping, however, is also the basis on which exclusion is created and recreated. Thus many participants, though they saw the merit of the concept of *gaydar*, approached it with a degree of caution. The long and the short of it is that lesbians struggle with stereotypes. As outsiders to the heterosexual norm, many know the dangers of stereotypes but they also rely on them in building their subcultures. Stereotypes, like any social structures, are both

“constraining and enabling” (Giddens, 1984). A Women’s Studies student sums up the qualities of gaydar as problematic and essential.

*I know that I find myself looking for lesbians or other members of the queer community, in public places. I don’t like the concept of “gaydar,” although it can be fun at times. Most “gaydar,” especially when practiced by straight people, bases itself mostly on gendered assumptions. I worry about the layers of supportive foundation we add to gender bigotry, sexism & homophobia when we play at assuming that every woman with masculine tendencies is a dyke, and each effeminate male is a fag. Enough of that diatribe—I think I can recognize other lesbians, often because they are looking to make those connections—to be seen.*  
(26 year old student and administrative affairs assistant, Mankato, Minnesota)

Consistent with Turner’s vision of role-making, however, there is also a creative and tentative aspect of gaydar, taking the process deeper than the enactment of superficial stereotypes. In fact, by participating in gaydar rituals in public places, lesbians are engaging in the social construction of their own reality in a world in which their reality is marginalized and often invisible. They are “playing with reality” (Berger, 1963) and refusing to accept the roles dictated by social structure. Lesbians, as a subculture, are highly motivated to engage in the processes of recognition and acknowledgment. They are often looking to set off their gaydar when in public places.

*Several years ago, I decided that if the world could assume that I was straight then I could assume that all the women I meet are queer until they prove themselves to be straight! My friends laugh when I say this but I try to live this way. It has worked well and it is fun.*  
(36 year old freelance personal manager, New York City)

*Generally, I look at the world through “gay coloured glasses” and would rather assume that the women I meet are lesbians.*  
(30 year old pilot and record store clerk, Vancouver)

The phenomenon of looking at the world through “gay coloured glasses” involves both conscious and unconscious efforts to create meaning and “ontological security” (Giddens, 1984) in a world in which lesbian identity can be alienating.

Lofland (1973) argues that categorical knowing, placing a person in roles is mainly visual. However, placing a person’s sexual orientation involves a deeper form

of categorical knowing. Lesbians responding to each other are responding to identities, not roles. Identities are socially situated. They are “cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgement of [their] participation or membership in social relations” (Stone, 1990).<sup>18</sup> In that social actors need each other to validate their identities mutual assessment of identities is an on-going process in the public realm. In that they need to read identities in order to know how to act towards a stranger, the reading of identities is an important interactional strategy. These mutual readings form the foundation upon which social interaction is based.

Reading a largely invisible identity requires grasping “sign vehicles” (Goffman, 1959). The concepts of “surface signs” and “subtle signs” are useful to introduce before looking in depth at the cues lesbians use in reading and signalling sexual identity. Surface signs may be defined as those obvious cues signifying a lesbian identity that even a heterosexual (i.e., an outsider) can pick up (e.g., a butch appearance or displays of affection between women). Subtle signs include those cues the meaning of which is clear mainly to insiders (e.g., pinkie rings or prolonged eye contact).

Strangers place each other into categories using three types of cues: appearance, space and behaviour (Lofland, 1973). Tables 1-3 list the gaydar cues that were mentioned most frequently by participants. The frequency is shown to illustrate how often a cue appeared in the data. This is by no means a comprehensive list. Some of these cues will be addressed in more detail in the discussion that follows however, due to space constraints, not all cues will given equal attention.

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<sup>18</sup>The literature on identity is complex, and detailed consideration of this topic is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Lesbian identity is a social identity which must be validated in social interaction. For an historical analysis of the concept of identity and how it applies to lesbians see Nielsen (1994).

Table 1: Appearance Cues

<b>General Body Image</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Androgynous appearance	Mentioned over 25 times
Punk aesthetic	Mentioned over 5 times
Unselfconscious about body	Mentioned over 10 times
Lack of make-up	Mentioned over 10 times
Short fingernails	Mentioned over 5 times
Stocky or fat body types	Mentioned over 5 times
<b>Clothing</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Plain clothes (no frills)	Mentioned over 15 times
Men's or boys clothes	Mentioned over 25 times
Boots (combat or clunky)	Mentioned over 25 times
Baggy pants	Mentioned over 10 times
Political t-shirts	Mentioned over 10 times
Baseball cap backwards	Mentioned over 5 times
Denim and flannel	Mentioned over 5 times
Black leather jackets	Mentioned over 10 times
Wide black belts	Mentioned over 10 times
<b>Hair</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Short hair	Mentioned over 25 times
Shaved hair	Mentioned over 25 times
Greying hair	Mentioned over 10 times
Mullet	Mentioned over 15 times
Slicked back hair	Mentioned over 5 times
Radical colour hair	Mentioned over 10 times
<b>Accessories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Rainbow insignia	Mentioned over 25 times
Keg chains or pagers on belt	Mentioned over 10 times
Buttons on knapsack	Mentioned over 10 times
Tattoos	Mentioned over 25 times
Multiple piercings	Mentioned over 25 times
No wedding ring	Mentioned over 5 times
Wallet in back pocket	Mentioned over 5 times
Feminist or lesbian jewellery	Mentioned over 15 times
Geek glasses	Mentioned over 15 times
Pinkie rings	Mentioned over 5 times

**Table 2: Spatial Cues**

<b>Gay/lesbian Spaces</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Lesbian/gay bars	Mentioned over 25 times
Gay Pride Marches	Mentioned over 25 times
Lesbian or feminist bookstores	Mentioned over 20 times
Gay or lesbian “ghettos”	Mentioned over 25 times
Gay/lesbian centres	Mentioned over 15 times
Lesbian or women’s sex stores	Mentioned over 5 times
Lesbian-owned coffee shops	Mentioned over 5 times
<b>Straight spaces</b>	
Women’s music concerts	Mentioned over 10 times
Health food stores/food co-ops	Mentioned over 10 times
Vegetarian restaurants	Mentioned over 5 times
Women’s/Queer Studies program	Mentioned over 5 times
Trendy urban neighbourhoods	Mentioned over 15 times
Urban dog runs	Mentioned over 5 times
Home Depot	Mentioned over 5 times
Feminist or political gatherings	Mentioned over 10 times
Punk rock concerts	Mentioned over 5 times

**Table 3: Behavioural Cues**

<b>Mannerisms</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Hands in pockets	Mentioned over 10 times
Swagger or strut	Mentioned over 25 times
Air of power and confidence	Mentioned over 25 times
Takes up more space	Mentioned over 20 times
Masculine stance	Mentioned over 25 times
Severe Body language	Mentioned over 10 times
<b>Actions and Tasks</b>	
Reading queer literature	Mentioned over 5 times
Playing sports	Mentioned over 10 times
Driving trucks or motorcycles	Mentioned over 10 times
Engaging in masculine labour	Mentioned over 15 times
PDA's with other women	Mentioned over 25 times
Looking at women	Mentioned over 25 times
Flirting with women	Mentioned over 20 times
Winking or nodding at women	Mentioned over 10 times
Intense eye contact	Mentioned over 25 times
Chivalrous behaviour	Mentioned over 10 times
Smiling at women	Mentioned over 25 times
<b>Verbal cues</b>	
Uses the word "partner"	Mentioned over 10 times
Louder and lower voice	Mentioned over 10 times
Avoids personal pronouns	Mentioned over 5 times
More direct and frank	Mentioned over 5 times
Air of casualty and familiarity	Mentioned over 5 times
Tiny innuendos in speech	Mentioned over 5 times
Discusses politics	Mentioned over 10 times
No mention of boyfriends/husbands	Mentioned over 5 times
Mentions lesbian culture (e.g., films)	Mentioned over 15 times
<b>Cues based on limited personal knowing</b>	
Has a history as a jock	Mentioned over 5 times
Is involved in left politics	Mentioned over 10 times
Most of her friends are gay	Mentioned over 5 times
Likes women's music	Mentioned over 10 times
Works in a non-traditional field	Mentioned over 10 times

### Appearance Cues

Gregory Stone (1981) argues that appearance and discourse are distinct but related dimensions of all social interaction. The universe of discourse, he suggests, can be conceptualized as the text of an interactional transaction. It involves the information we gather from strangers based on what is said in an encounter. However, the universe of appearance is the more basic of the two and involves transactions occurring at a non-discursive level. First impressions are based on the universe of appearance. The universe of appearance, then, “sets the stage for, permits, sustains and delimits the possibilities of discourse by underwriting the possibilities of meaningful discussion” (Stone 1981: 103). All meaningful interaction between lesbian strangers is based first on appearance impressions.

Appearance cues (see table 1) are the easiest of the gaydar cues to grasp but they are far from simple. As an invisible minority group, lesbians drawing on cues from the universe of appearance must look beyond easily identifiable external appearance cues to the very minute specifics of those cues. The descriptions of appearance cues offered by participants were detailed, humorous and analytical.

*Sometimes I need a set of cues for my gaydar to go off. Short hair, of course, makes me think twice, especially if it is spikey, slicked back, anything butch. In NYC it can get tricky because straight women have co-opted many dyke looks. If a woman has long hair but has piercings in places other than her ears or tattoos I might think she's a dyke. The other things that make me think “hmmm” are clunky black shoes or boots, those damn rainbows, shirts that say “dyke” are pretty easy, baggy jeans hanging off someone's hips, thick black leather belts, torn clothing that looks like it was found under a rock and anything that is considered, by the outside world, as belonging to men.*

(36 year old freelance personal manager, New York City)

*Most lesbians have at least one strong visual cue. Generally appearance is edgier. Cues others may not have mentioned are: easy to care for haircuts, more accepting of grey or radical hair colour, short fingernails, visible tattoos with explicit feminist or lesbian images, pinkie rings for older professional lesbians, sensible shoes, heavier body weight (with little preoccupation); absence of very feminine clothes (frills, flowers, busy patterns), unless intended as parody.*

(41 year old professor, Winnipeg)

Participants point out that there are many types of lesbians. In contemporary society, lesbian identity, as a social identity, is complicated by a large number of personal identities.<sup>19</sup> Due to the subcultural complexity of the lesbian community, participants often placed lesbians into a complex system of personal identity categories. The social category *lesbian* was broken down repeatedly into subtypes and each subtype had its own set of cues and stereotypes.

*There is so much diversity in 'appearance' in Toronto that sometimes it's difficult to tell but there are the usual stereotypes for each type of lesbian--boy/lipstick /granola/ leather/ executive/ jock/academic. Sometimes appearances can give these 'types' away and I think that hair and clothes can be quite telling*  
(37 year old Ph.D. student, Toronto)

*As for clothes, there are so many types of women that it is difficult to say. There are the women who wear baggy pants and oversized shirts. Then you have the ones who dress alternatively and have many peircings and tattoos. Then I also see the business/professional types. Then you have the athletic types...Come to think of it, lesbians are just as diverse as heterosexuals.*  
(26 year old research assistant, New York City)

Apparential ordering was further complicated by historical complexity. A number of participants indicated that using appearance to read a woman's sexual identity has become increasingly difficult, as "*straight women have co-opted many dyke looks*".

*I do use 'appearance cues'--but it is not one single physical indicator (i.e., short hair or clothing style) that makes me suspect a woman is a lesbian, but a combination (of several physical things). Appearance is a very unreliable indicator. A lot of signs that might have been better indicators of lesbianism are now much more widespread as fashion among young women (i.e. very short hair, heavy boots or belts) are no longer very definitive. For the first few days of class last year I wondered if one of my classmates was a lesbian (no make up, very short, squarish blonde hair, jeans, combat boots etc.) until we started talking and she told me about her boyfriend.*  
(22 year old student and legal worker, Vancouver)

It might be tempting to conclude that appearance cues are no longer reliable as indicators of lesbian identity but the study found that appearance is as important as ever.

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<sup>19</sup> See Hewitt (1994) for a discussion of the difference between social and personal identities.

Reading appearance signals, however, has become a complicated undertaking. Accurate readings require a fine-tuned grasp of subtle signs of gaydar and an understanding of the subcultural complexity of the lesbian community. As a subculture, lesbians have developed a very rich and detailed understanding of appearance cues.

As an appearance cue, hair reveals this complexity. Short hair has traditionally been a surface sign in the lesbian subculture. Several respondents suggested, however, that while short hair used to be a reliable indicator of lesbian identity, it no longer is. This is not to say that lesbians no longer use hair as an indicator in tagging other lesbians and in their own presentation of self, but rather that lesbians draw on a complex understanding of differences between straight short hair and lesbian short hair. Short hair may be one of the first indicators drawn upon in taking a second look but subtle signs must be detected to predict the reliability of the haircut as an indicator of lesbian identity.

*In my early days as a conscious lesbian, the short hair was almost always the dominant and accurate clue. That was in the late 70s and early 80s—the days of Farrah Fawcett's big hair. We really stood out in the rejection of the feminine. In those early days the short hair was practically a dead give away. But today fashion is no longer compartmentalized—anything goes, just about, for anyone—and hairstyle is no indicator of anything in particular. Although, having said that, if there is a crowd of us at Purdy's [lesbian bar], we do all tend to sport the same haircut—short. Actually there is one difference between dykes with short hair and punks with short hair: we just wear ours short, while theirs tends to be more dramatically spiked and "coiffed" as a statement.*

(41-year-old corporate director, Winnipeg)

Perhaps due to its history as a reliable appearance cue, hair was often treated with humour by participants. For example, there is a haircut that is often joked about by lesbians (short and spiky at the top and long in the back—in some cases with a tail). This haircut was popular among lesbians in the 1980s and some lesbians still see it as an important part of their presentation of self. The "mullet," as this hairstyle has been

dubbed, was referred to in the study as “the tragic mullet”, or “hockey hair.” The consensus seems to be that a woman cannot be straight and have a mullet haircut.

*I think that there are a lot of stereotypical (white working class lesbian) haircuts around (short on the top, long in the back, “the mud flap”, “the softball coach,” “business-in-the-front-party-in-the-back).”*

(24 year old graduate student and bookstore clerk, Mankato, Minnesota)

The mullet haircut is associated with the stereotypical lesbian and perhaps represents her more than any other feature in the same way that the “ducktail” haircut was a symbol of working-class butch sexual identity in the 1950s (Nestle, 1987). Lesbian hairstyles have changed historically and different hairstyles dominate in various lesbian subcultures, yet hair remains the number one signifier of lesbian identity.

Appearance cues are also complicated by other social identities (e.g., age, race, social class and occupation). Participants used hairstyles and clothing to place lesbians into social categories within the larger lesbian subculture. Some identities were viewed as easier to read using appearance alone (e.g., working class lesbians).<sup>20</sup> Farmers, athletes, black women, femmes, younger lesbians, rich lesbians and punk rockers were among the identities mentioned in the study as harder to place by appearance alone.

*Well there’s the traditional butchy thing of short hair, men’s clothes (pants, button up shirt), sensible shoes, no make up and no purse! Although these cues can often lead to confusion with athletic women and farmers.*

(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

Due to subcultural and historical complexity gaydar is activated by more than appearance. However, clothing, hair and other traditional appearance cues remain important for lesbians in presenting their selves in public places.

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<sup>20</sup>Significantly, many participants stated that they find it easier to read lesbians from their own social background. White women found white lesbians easier to read. Younger lesbians often felt it was easier to tag younger lesbians, while older lesbians often found it harder to place the sexual identities of younger.

### Spatial Cues

Lyn Lofland (1973) argues that in modern urban society people have an increasingly sophisticated grasp of spatial cues.<sup>21</sup> She argues that a world in which appearances can be deceiving, cues based on where a person is physically located have become more crucial than appearance cues in ordering the urban populace. This study confirmed the significance of spatial cues (see table 2), but it found that space was not the most reliable cue for placing a lesbian identity. There are two reasons for this discrepancy. First, Lofland was examining the ordering of the general population, not a specific subculture. Secondly, there have been many historical changes in the lesbian subculture over the last five decades making lesbian/gay spaces less reliable as cues.

*Today's progressive politics can bring all sorts of alternative types together in what may have, in the past, been a lesbian space. To assume that all short haired 'tougher' looking women in, for example, Mondragon Café [alternative coffee shop] are lesbians is to be naive today. Even in Purdy's [lesbian bar] it is no longer safe to make the Carte blanche assumption-the need for exclusive lesbian space is no longer as urgent as it was in my early days (read 80s) because there is better acceptance and legal protection for gays and lesbians than existed back then.*  
(41 year old corporate director, Winnipeg)

Since they are also members of the dominant culture, lesbians must negotiate their rounds of life in a world where most of the places they populate are dominated by a heterosexual norm. Space, as a gaydar cue, is most useful for instigating a reading of lesbian identity. Lesbians can be found in every conceivable identity location (based on class, race and politics) and live in and utilize all areas of the city. Definitive spatial indicators are often limited to gay spaces or gay friendly environments.

*I will have my antenna up in gay neighbourhoods. Wolseley in Winnipeg, Little Italy in T.O., Park Slope in NYC...I am always spotting women in these areas of town.*  
(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

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<sup>21</sup> For a detailed historical analysis of the changing significance of appearance, behavioural and spatial ordering see Lyn Lofland's (1973) book A World of Strangers.

Two ideas are persistent in examining spatial cues. One is the possibility that lesbians become more visible to each other in straight spaces. The other is that lesbian identity is easier to mark with certainty in lesbian/gay spaces. These themes may appear to contradict each other, but they are compatible. The first theme raises the concept of motivation. With respect to social interaction, motivation refers to the forces that impel actors towards social action (Hewitt, 1994). A sense of isolation in straight spaces makes lesbians more likely to notice other lesbians in heterosexually dominated spaces as they are motivated to see and be seen by other lesbians and to create the social solidarity and sense of safety that comes with recognizing one of their own.

*When surrounded by straight people (family restaurants, especially) I think other lesbians become more visible to me.*

(26 year old student and student affair administrator, Mankato, Minnesota)

The second idea is that spatial cues help identify lesbians if other cues are present. On several occasions I became conscious of assessing spatial cues when I approached lesbians on the street to ask them to participate in the study. In one instance I used a combination of spatial cues and a prop to assess the identity of two young women on a New York City sidewalk. They did not have stereotypical appearances and I may not have stopped them had the prop not sparked my gaydar. One of the women was carrying a shopping bag from "Toys in Babeland", a lesbian-owned sex shop in New York City, and I spotted the women on the Lower East Side, not far from the store. In the absence of clear appearance cues the prop sparked my gaydar, which was further confirmed by the spatial cues.

Many respondents point out that their assumptions about who is found in gay/lesbian spaces has led to identity misreads.

*I am more likely to assume that someone is queer if she is in a lesbian space (i.e., bar, bookstore, pride march) but in the East Village of Manhattan, I do recognize that there are many queer-friendly exceptions even within those spaces (straight friends, or should I say heterosexual "queer" people-people I might incorrectly assume are lesbian).*

(25 year old student and receptionist, New York City)

In the modern urban climate then, space alone cannot be used to accurately assess sexual identity. If a woman looks straight she may not be read as a lesbian, even in a gay bar. However, a gay bar might serve as a cue to correct an earlier misread. Consider the following situation outlined by a femme-identified lesbian who says her lesbian identity is overlooked by other lesbians at least 85% of the time.

*We took our pet to the emergency vet clinic where she was seen by a female veterinarian. This woman was totally cold/rude/unapproachable. I knew she was a dyke right away, but she obviously didn't read me as one (maybe because I was femme: dressy work clothes, make up, emotional etc...). She had no compassion or acknowledgment of the importance of my pet to me. A few weeks later I saw her at the bar and a friend of mine introduced me and I reminded her who I was (it was a very unique cat health issue, so she recalled it easily), she was very surprised. She hadn't known I was a lesbian, and after we were re-acquainted (in a social setting), she was very warm, friendly and easy to talk to. She wanted to know how my cat was doing etc... even though she obviously hadn't cared when I brought the cat into emergency.*

(25 year old social service worker, Winnipeg)

In this scenario, space was a major interactional variable. In the straight space of the veterinarian's office, the participant's lesbian identity was not read by the veterinarian; though evidently had it been read it might have created a situation where norms of civility were heightened. This reading could have created a situation in which the cat owner would have experienced less stress (although not necessarily). Once in the bar, she did not need to say anything revealing about her sexual orientation to the veterinarian. Once the veterinarian saw her in a lesbian space, the latent cues that may have been too subtle before were immediately brought into play. The definition of the situation was drastically different once the validation of lesbian identities became mutual. Social interaction flowed more easily and an attitude of caring developed.

This is only one possible interpretation of this scenario. Space is a complex variable and its effect on guiding interaction is equally complicated. The veterinarian may present a more professional demeanour in her office but be more relaxed in the space of a lesbian bar. There is also the issue of situational inequality (Lofland, 1990). The patient, being in a vulnerable position, may have been looking for shared identity to set her at ease. The doctor, who is a position of power, had less need to look for solidarity. It is also possible that the pet owner may have looked more lesbian in the bar due to the situational management of sign vehicles. Several participants suggested that lesbians often alter their behaviour and appearance cues when they spot other lesbians in a public setting, especially those who worry that they will not be seen as lesbian. The folk term for this is “butching up.” One participant takes this idea a step further and suggests that lesbians alter their behaviour when they enter lesbian spaces.

*I believe that in terms of behaviour, possibly without their conscious knowledge, lesbians change their body language within specific locations that are lesbian or gay friendly.*  
(30 year old special education teacher, New York City)

This possibility that lesbians manipulate appearance and behavioural cues spatially provides strong evidence of the dramaturgical qualities of lesbian presentation of self.

### Behavioural Cues

The study also addressed the meaningfulness of behavioural cues for lesbians (see table 3). Behavioural cues may transcend the historical and subcultural complexity of appearance and spatial cues. Thus participants often view them as the most reliable cues. Behavioural cues are the actions, mannerisms and verbal signals that lesbians use in presenting themselves in public places and they are often expressions given

(Goffman, 1959) which other lesbians pick up. Behavioural cues, however, are more likely than appearance cues to be unconscious and thus exist as expressions given off. For the purpose of analysis, behavioural cues have been broken down into three categories: blatant behavioural cues, subtle behavioural cues and intangible cues.

Blatant behavioural cues are often the ones first mentioned by lesbians when asked what tips off their gaydar. One clear behavioural cue involves an assessment of “withs” (Goffman, 1971). There is a casualness detectable in the behaviour of people in a with that indicates intimacy and familiarity. Lauer and Handle (1977; 434-435) point out that

[m]embers of a with generally stand closer together; are relatively more open to each other and are more likely to make physical contact-to guide one another, to hold hands, or put an arm around one another’s shoulder or waist. Exceptional liberties might be taken such as mutual grooming... utilizing intimate forms.

When appraising identities in public places, lesbians often scrutinize the behaviour of people in groups. Behavioural cues signifying lesbian identities can be found in the actions of couples or groups of women in public places.

*I always look at groups of women that contain no men, or perhaps a gay man. I don't think straight women hang out very often without men.*  
(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

*Naturally if someone looks overtly gay, that immediately draws my attention. If someone does not but is with another gay person, the interaction between them triggers my recognition. Simple things like level of comfort with each other and other unspoken signals can do it.*  
(51 year old social worker, New Windsor, New York)

Respondents stated repeatedly that lesbians are much easier to spot when with lesbian friends and even more so when with lovers. When together in public, lesbians create the dynamics of a with. The actions engaged in by lesbians in groups have identifiable subcultural characteristics that provide blatant behavioural cues.

*I have found that most gay women touch each other in public...arms around the back, even for a few moments. Lesbians are a lot more flirtatious and tend to be much louder and more vocal [than straight women]when they are together in public.*

(31 year old graphic designer, Toronto)

Evidently the subtle and blatant actions, energy and intimacy that pass between lesbians in straight public spaces make it easier to code the behaviour of lesbians in groups as opposed to lesbians who are alone. Even straight people sense the intimacy of lesbians together, although they may not understand it and often make erroneous assumptions.

*[My partner] and I rarely walk hand in hand down the street, or spend afternoons kissing in the park, but don't hide the intimacy of our relationship in how we communicate—only an idiot would not recognize us as intimates. While we would not rate high on the physical "outness" scale in public through overt displays of affection, the true nature of our relationship comes through in how we talk with, look at and relate to each other...say, across a table at a restaurant.*

(41 year old corporate director, Winnipeg)

*Couples are easier to spot because the communication is so different. I think that is why two women together will be asked if they are sisters. There is an intimacy that can be observed by the most remote contact. That makes 'singles' harder to identify.*

(30 year old pilot and record store clerk, Vancouver)

But the "most remote contact" often does not "get it." This is why heterosexual strangers often ask a lesbian couple the nature of their relationship. People are curious about relationship connections when they witness a with in public places. Heterosexual assumptions often confuse them. When with a man, a woman will rarely be asked if he is her brother. But lesbians together in public are often asked what their relationship to each other is.<sup>22</sup> While many straight people do not understand the intimacy between lesbian couples, lesbians usually pick up the behavioural cues around the way women relate to each other and use it in assessing sexual orientation and building solidarity.

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<sup>22</sup>It seems that people need to make sense of a with in order to define situations and when they cannot, they sometimes breach norms of propriety and come out and ask, if there is an opening. One partner used to look over at me when people asked if we were sisters and say "yeah we are sisters in the struggle." The questioner usually realized that she has made a faux pas and tried to repair the damaged interaction and save face by saying something like "oh but you look so alike."

When reading the identity of a woman who is alone, those interactional cues are not available.

A related blatant cue is public affection between women. One participant called this cue "PDAs" (public displays of affection). The phenomenon of PDAs brought to light the connection between appearance and the interpretation of behaviour. If the women engaging in public affection do not look like stereotypical lesbians, strangers may interpret their affectionate behaviour differently than they would if the women are more obviously lesbian. As a participant observer, I found my own engagement in PDAs with my partner was a valuable methodological tool for receiving the signals and strategies described in the study. Many lesbians are drawn to public displays of outness between lesbians and are more likely to initiate interaction with strangers that they see engaged in PDAs. In fact, I found that I was more likely to give out the flyer for the survey to less obvious lesbians if they were engaged in PDAs. The risk of a misread was significantly reduced.<sup>23</sup>

Breaching of gender norms by activities is another obvious behavioural cue used by lesbians in assessing sexual orientation in public places. Participants mentioned that seeing women engaged in traditionally masculine activities such as fixing cars, lifting heavy things and riding motorcycles often set off their gaydar. Several participants point out, however, that many straight women also engage in non-traditional activities. Gender bending tasks, therefore, are cues to be used in conjunction with other cues because they can be misleading if used alone.

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<sup>23</sup>In handing out the survey, I realize that I assumed that if a lesbian couple is willing to show public affection they must be out. Accordingly, I assumed that they would be less likely to be offended by my offer of an explicitly lesbian survey. Thus, in my mind, the risk of creating an awkward moment was significantly reduced when I approached couples engaged in PDAs.

*It has to do with confidence, taking up space, being who they are despite (usually) being in the minority. Also, if women are engaged in traditionally male tasks—working out of doors (building a deck, front path etc.), driving a truck etc. AND their appearance is “non-traditional” I tend to assume their sexual identity is lesbian.*

(41 year old corporate director, Winnipeg)

The universe of discourse, of course, provides cues that help in making a placement. Verbal cues can be blatant when a lesbian directly announces her identity in some manner. In my experiences as a lesbian interacting in public places, however, I have found that lesbian strangers are not likely to talk immediately about lesbian issues. Doing so too soon in the interaction breaches the norms that call for more subtlety around issues of sexuality. A “password procedure” (Gardner, 1994) is a form of behavioural coding (Lofland, 1973). This “name dropping” technique is used to guide interaction. The following story illustrates the use of a subtle verbal cue as a password. Notice how appearance and behavioural cues are assessed from a distance but become confirmed through more focussed social interaction. This scenario, I think, illustrates the on-going and creative process of lesbian identity negotiation.

*While in New York City, waiting in line to catch a ferry back to Manhattan from Ellis Island, myself and a lesbian friend noticed two women standing in line in front of us. They were standing much closer together than two heterosexual women would stand. I nodded towards the women so my friend would take a look, and then I raised my eyebrows to indicate I thought they were “family”. She gave me a knowing nod of agreement. Both were rather soft butch—but their hair was short pixie type cuts, and both wearing similar clothes—tank tops and shorts—and they had matching rings. I struck up a conversation, asking them if they had found any relatives in the archives that had come through Ellis Island when they immigrated to the USA. They responded laughingly that “our relatives came to America on American Airlines...not the boat.” We all had a good laugh. I mentioned us not being from New York and the conversation (as I directed it so I could confirm their lesbian status) came around to places we have gone while we were visiting. I mentioned “Fire Island”—THE lesbian/gay summer place to be. Immediately we knew we were amongst friends. We rode the ferry together talking about lesbian life. We ended up riding on the subway to our transfer point discussing gay life in New York and our love of sushi!!! As we exited the train both of them grabbed our hands and squeezed—a small symbol of solidarity. We smiled and said “stay proud.” Memories created in moments—that will last a lifetime.*

(32 year old, graphic designer, Toronto)

Sometimes verbal cues confirm a reading when appearance and spatial cues are ambiguous. Other times, verbal cues initiate the process of looking for behavioural or appearance cues to clarify what has been said. When a lesbian suspects that another woman is gay and hears her refer to her “partner” or to specific lesbian spaces or “women’s music,” these cues help confirm the placement. Hearing the sound of a woman’s voice was mentioned several times. The participants point out that there is a difficult-to-describe voice quality that many lesbians have. This voice quality is related to being deeper but involves something less tangible than depth. Other respondents suggested that the topics a woman chooses to discuss are verbal cues. Lesbians are viewed as more forceful in conversations and more blunt. These cues of manner and verbal intimations are noticed, I suspect, when other cues are present. One New Yorker made the following comment about verbal cues.

*This is HUGE to me, a girl can talk to me for ten seconds and my gaydar approaches conclusion. Lesbians seem to me to be very open and proud of their sexuality. Not afraid to make it a topic to discuss and ponder...*

(22 year old coffee shop employee, New York City)

Another subtle verbal cue involves assessing what is *not* said in conversations. This is a cue that is rarely apparent to heterosexual strangers but often assessed by lesbians, especially when dealing with more closeted lesbians. For example, the subtle verbal action of avoiding personal pronouns by a woman talking about a relationship is a cue that she is concealing a lesbian identity. Similarly hearing a woman refer to another woman as a “roommate” has traditionally been a subtle verbal cue.

“Cues based on limited personal knowing” are the verbal cues we gather about strangers from brief encounters or from some piece of previous knowledge of an individual (Lofland, 1973). Personal knowledge that can be gleaned from a stranger

can be useful in placing her sexual identity. If an opening has occurred between lesbian strangers then both parties often engage in subtle question-asking and gleaning of cues based on expressions directly given (e.g. indirect or direct information) and expressions given off (e.g. holes in the conversation or what is unsaid) in order to confirm their identity placement. Thus strangers may actively seek information from a woman in order to appraise her sexual identity. The following two passages list some of these cues based on limited personal knowing.

*Occupation: is she in a non-traditional field? A Social worker? A teacher (especially a gym teacher)?*

*Musical tastes: Does she love women with acoustic guitars especially Indigo Girls? K.D. Lang? Melissa Etheridge?"*

(30 year old website producer, New York City)

*What work they do –volunteer at AIDS walk—work at a crisis centre.*

*Who their friends are ("I am not a lesbian but my girlfriend is")*

*What the people they hang out with look like.*

*Whether they are (or have a history as) a jock.*

*Whether they own a large, mixed breed dog and more than one cat.*

(41 year old professor, Winnipeg)

In the lesbian subculture, categorical knowing is often complicated by degrees of personal knowing because of the relative smallness of the lesbian community in any city. Knowledge of another, based on information about her biography, is sometimes used along with more objective categorizations. Since many lesbians know of each other or have seen each other in lesbian contexts, even though they are strangers to each other, they use this information in their assessments. Seeing another woman who looks familiar can also lead to encounter openings as the following passage suggests:

*I am very good at remembering faces, if I pass a womyn who I might have seen or spoken to from a bar, basketball game or any lesbian event I usually say "how's it going". Usually the womyn are receptive with no further concern. Though some look puzzled and this leads to a conversation where we question where we met, when, where and if we have friends in common.*

(26 year old research assistant, New York City)

Reading body language involves grasping more subtle cues, although in the case of very butch lesbians these cues may be quite blatant. Lesbians read mannerisms, gestures, stance, walk and demeanour when they assess the identities of other lesbians.

*Again behaviour cues I pick up on (or identify as being lesbian) often involve taking up increased physical space—open posture, broader stance, stronger more purposeful gait.*  
(26 year old law student and legal researcher, Vancouver)

*Usually the way she carries herself, not so much the “swagger walk” which is traditionally associated with lesbians, but more of a cool confidence. That has been the difference as I have seen it in the 20+ years being in the community.*  
(42 year old publishing representative, Louisville)

Body language is often used to determine differences between heterosexual women and lesbians. Reading lesbian identity necessarily means setting up a dichotomy of straight/not straight, as problematic as this may be. Thus women are often assessed as lesbians based on the fact that they do things or wear things that straight women as a general category would not do or wear. Consider the following passage:

*I think there is more than just clothes and hair—it is a combination that includes body language. A straight woman can wear masculine attire but I have my doubts that she is gay because the cues are broader. For example, I have a co-worker who I am sure is a lesbian (well, it turns out she has a female “roommate” and they seem more involved than sharing house bills). This woman will wear stereotypical feminine clothing but her “sporty” gait makes me think she’d be more comfortable in a ball field. She seems a bit more masculine in voice, manner and body movement. To me this is a common giveaway. Straight women rarely express their body language in that way (and when they do I usually think they are bisexual or closeted).*  
(46 year old communications coordinator, Winnipeg)

This passage points to the (assumed) definitiveness of behavioural cues. Many lesbians feel that body language signals are telling signs of lesbianism. Women who display these cues but do not identify as lesbian are often seen as not out yet or closeted.

*Sometimes I’m so sure of a woman’s lesbian sexuality that when I find out I’m wrong I figure that she just isn’t out yet (even to herself).*  
(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

When lesbians tag women who are not yet out, they often base this conclusion on a reading of body language. A woman may dress femininely and show no verbal signs of lesbianism but her actions indicate otherwise. The clothing is viewed as a disguise.

*Of course, there are a lot of women who have an air of power, independence and forcefulness who are not at all gay. I think we've all been fooled. But you know, I often wonder if it's us who've been fooled or if the individual is fooling herself. For example, my brother in law's mother-in-law (if you can understand that) gave birth to five children, one of whom is a lesbian (the child she appears closest to). She has always been an observant Catholic and I doubt she has ever acted on any lesbian impulses. However, I would bet my last dollar that she is a lesbian.*

(51 year old social worker, New Windsor, New York)

When lesbians receive an "aura" from a woman who claims not to be a lesbian or who gives no verbal cues to that effect, they often feel that she will eventually come out as a lesbian. One participant named this "aura" detected by lesbians "DP" (Dyke Potential) and another called it "dyke possibility".

*Sometimes women have what I call "DP" (dyke potential) and it is somewhat of an intangible characteristic. Generally my instincts are correct, even if the woman in question does not know it yet!*

(30 year old website producer, New York City)

This passage raises the fascinating possibility that lesbians read something slightly beyond body language. This bearing or aura is perhaps the most subtle cue of all but it seems to be one of the most significant and defining types of cues, used in tagging both out lesbians and those who are not out, or still in denial. I named this type of subtle behavioural cue "intangible" when I found that a large number of survey respondents said that many lesbians possess a trait that leads them to "just feel" that someone is a lesbian.

These intangible cues exist as prediscursive knowledge and are the ideas that informants have trouble expressing in direct ways. Social actors unconsciously draw

on a wealth of implicit knowledge in everyday interaction (Giddens, 1984; Spradley, 1980). Lesbians draw upon this tacit subcultural knowledge in assessing lesbian strangers but are not necessarily aware of doing so. Many respondents said that until they were forced to think about it they had not been aware of this intangible essence. These tacit cues were variously described as “dyke energy,” an “intangible characteristic,” a “vibe,” “lesbian essence,” and “dyke power.” One participant has pointed out that this intangible essence is generated by “hidden cues” that then produce a “feeling” which is experienced by the interactants.

*I believe there are a thousand hidden cues that we give to one another and that we then interpret as a feeling. But there is a feeling I get when I discover another lesbian. I am having a hard time narrowing it down...It's a look, a feeling, a vibe that they send you that says, I see you, I recognize you. Now I don't believe in ESP so I think it must be a form of non-verbal communication but it's hard to put my finger on exactly what it is.*

(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

In pondering the meaning of recognition, this participant tried to articulate whether the notion of a detectable essence can be extended to other subcultural groups.

*When I drove a motorcycle, fellow bikers would always wave to me and I would wave back. It was like a community, but I don't think you could tell who had a motorcycle just by looking around a crowded room. But I could easily tell you who had dyke possibility, and after a short period of time who I could confirm. I am not sure there are other groups who can do this. Can Mennonites spot other Mennonites? I doubt it.*

(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

The questionnaire encouraged participants to put this intangible essence into words. Interestingly even those respondents who said they couldn't articulate this trait were able to provide insight into its qualities. A lesbian essence, it appears, transcends appearance and behavioural cues and enters into the realm of attitude and energy.

*I identify women as lesbian (I admit it) based on hair, clothes and mannerisms but also their “essence.” Lesbians have an indescribable trait that just screams “I'm a lesbian.”*

(27 year social work student, Winnipeg)

*I feel there is a "dyke energy" that I pick up on...not all dykes seem to have this, but it is an energy, a connection that I feel with many...I don't know how to explain this in words...*  
(25 year old student and receptionist, New York City)

*Perhaps there is some sort of "attitude" or way that lesbians bear themselves in public which is what alerts me to the fact that someone is a lesbian, I know I've recognized lesbians who are not otherwise physically "out" or who do not fit any of the "typical" lesbian images.*  
(22 year old student and legal worker, Vancouver)

Analysis of the participants' descriptions of this intangible trait reveals that this it is best described as a certain interpersonal power that, through gender socialization, is generally denied women in the larger culture (or is viewed as not desirable in a woman). "Strong presence" and a tendency to "bust down societal norms" were mentioned as ways to describe this essence.

*Lesbians that I recognize tend to have an assertive stance and poise that says "don't feed me any of your bullshit, cause I can see right through it." They tend to be more direct, frank and seem more intelligent.*  
(26-year-old graduate student and student affairs administrator, Mankato, Minnesota)

*Some dykes have a "yeah, I'm a dyke, don't fuck with me" stance. It is a very particular kind of dyke power.*  
(36 year-old personal manager, New York City)

I interpret this intangible essence as a (barely) readable mind-set or attitude which is displayed subtly on the lesbian body and which affects the way more tangible cues are read. This defiant attitude is not only evident in behaviour, although it might be most obvious there, but is also clear in clothing. Thus we find that appearance cues and behavioural cues are connected through this intangible essence.

*I find it hard to articulate how I identify specific hairstyles or modes of dress as being "gay" or "lesbian"—at best I can say that I pick up on an individual's style as being one that does not cater to, or is not aimed for consumption by, a "male gaze." Most often I find hair and clothing styles that I identify as being "lesbian" are distinguished by the manner in which they accentuate personal power. Rarely do either "confine" lesbians physically in the same way that heterosexual women often dress in a manner that confines the personal space they take up.*  
(26 year old law student and legal researcher, Vancouver)

In reading stranger's identities, it appears, subtle differences between lesbians and heterosexual women are often drawn upon. One of these subtle differences is based on the presence (or absence) of this unique intangible trait. I have offered a rudimentary interpretation of this trait but I suspect it is even more complex. I will return to this notion of an intangible essence in examining gender presentation.

The actions spurred by ritual recognition, of course, are pivotal behavioural cues, both blatant and subtle. One of the ways that lesbians know with a high degree of confidence whether a woman is a lesbian is the way she reacts to other lesbian strangers. That is, lesbians read the reactions of other lesbians to their own identities and use these as cues. The interactions that lesbians engage in to acknowledge each other will be discussed below as strategies of acknowledgement. These include eye contact, nodding, smiling, brief acknowledgement and low-level flirting.

## **2. Public Expression: Presentation of Self**

### Lesbian Impression Management

The fundamental principle of dramaturgical sociology is "that the meaning of people's doings is to be found in the manner in which they express themselves in interaction with similarly expressive others" (Brissett and Edgley, 1990). As a predominantly front stage region, the public realm is the "quintessential social territory" (Lofland, 1998) for the staging of identities. Social actors in private and parochial realms are personally known to each other. In the public realm, a world guided by categorical knowing, people are freer to present themselves as they choose. They are

not as constrained by established labels, statuses and identities as they are in private worlds. This freedom makes the public realm a fascinating area in which to analyze strategies of impression management.

Goffman (1959) saw that as people in cities move from situation to situation in the public world they can be observed to alter their expressions (sometimes radically) to suit the circumstances. His observations of the public world revealed that in the presence of strangers, social actors constantly monitor sign vehicles in order to glean information from people. Accordingly, they design their own cues to make a desired impression. In the process of impression management, expressions are the instruments for producing impressions. They can be both conscious and voluntary (expressions given) or involuntary and unconscious (expressions given off). In short, social actors read both expressions given and expressions given off in order to know what to expect from a stranger and how to act towards him or her. Likewise, they design their own expressions in response to the expressions received from those they encounter in public places (i.e., the audience).

Due to the interactional labour required in staging (or concealing) a lesbian identity in a heterosexually dominated society, lesbian presentation of self provides an intriguing topic for dramaturgical analysis. Sexual identity is often less visible than other identities (e.g., gender, race, age). Strangers will assume the default sexuality (heterosexuality) unless cues are present to indicate otherwise. Furthermore, in some situations lesbians may wish to make their sexual identity apparent (e.g., when they want to connect with other gay people) and in some situations they may wish to keep their lesbian identity concealed (e.g., when dealing with perceived danger).

Dramaturgical awareness refers to a situation in which social actors have a heightened consciousness of the theatrical qualities of their social engagements (Brissett and Edgley, 1990). Dramaturgical awareness is variable. In situations where the audience is perceived as important, awareness of expressiveness increases. The study found that many lesbians are highly conscious of their presentation of self in public places, not only when they encounter other lesbians but also when they encounter situations in which visible lesbian identity presents a risk.

To gain an understanding of dramaturgical awareness, I asked the participants if they thought they presented a lesbian identity in public places. The majority indicated that at least some of the time they were conscious of intentionally manipulating cues to present a lesbian identity. Interestingly, a number of times I found a difference between what a respondent reported in terms of her intentions around self-image and what she reported in terms of her actual behaviour. That is, several of the participants claimed that they were “just themselves” in public and did not try to display any identity in particular. These participants nonetheless went on to describe the ways that they designed their cues to be read as lesbians by other lesbians in public places.

*No. Although I am conscious not to wear make-up and sometimes I deliberately “butch up” but I mostly wear casual clothing. However, I always choose to buy men’s clothing over women’s.*  
(36 year old graduate student, Toronto)

*No I don’t think I design my appearance for purposes of sexual identity (unless you would include my efforts to appear femme).*  
(28 year old convenience store clerk, Winnipeg)

It is likely that many people, when asked, would deny that they consciously manipulate their self-presentations for an audience.<sup>24</sup> It is a tendency for social actors

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<sup>24</sup>For lesbians this denial of conscious impression management may stem, in part, from a rejection of negative societal images of lesbians.

to want to appear natural and non-contrived. Goffman (1959) refers to this inclination as "idealization." The credibility of the self is linked to the degree to which that self appears to others to be expressed unintentionally (Lauer and Handel, 1977). Regardless of a tendency towards idealization, the majority of participants in the study said that they often consciously designed their self-image around their lesbian identity. They did so to capture the attention of a lesbian audience or, sometimes, to avoid attention from a male audience.

*I am looking to attract other dykes so in that way I am dressing to be recognized. Recognized and appreciated.*

(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

*I do not dress or appear straight (leaning towards being feminine). I appear androgynous and dress functionally with a conscious effort not to appear attractive to straight men. It must be working because I've not been hit on by a man in over 20 years since I came out.*

(46 year old letter carrier and massage therapist, Winnipeg)

With respect to dramaturgical awareness, it should be noted that lesbians who have been out for many years sometimes found the impulse to express a lesbian identity had decreased over time.

*In my early days, I took pains to emphasize my lesbian identity: wearing a jean jacket with a big feminist power fist on the back and sporting political buttons that clearly identified me as a political feminist and lesbian. I took pleasure in thumbing my nose (quietly mind you-I'm very well behaved) at society's expectations of me as a woman out there. Today, more than 20 years later, I am comfortable and confident in who I am, how I live and where I go. I've had the big "L" removed from my forehead, so that's one major clue removed for the public to i.d. me by. I certainly don't have a classic butch look, but I don't look like a typical het either. I claim space as best I can, do not defer to men in public. I wear my hair short, usually wear pants or shorts (the occasional dress or skirt in the summer always elicits comments from friends and coworkers), do not often carry a purse (I use a backpack) and expect to make my own way.*

(41 year old corporate director, Winnipeg)

Notice that having had "the big 'L' (lesbian) removed from her forehead," this participant feels that her subtle behavioural cues identify her as lesbian more than any direct appearance cues. Her lesbian presentation of self has become so ingrained in her

self-image that she is hardly conscious of it anymore. She has gone from “thumbing her nose at society’s expectations of women” to more subtle symbols of lesbian identity (e.g., short hair, no purse, confident carriage). For some participants, their lesbian presentation of self had become so customary that they felt out of place (“in drag”) when they tried to put on more heterosexual (or feminine) types of clothing.

*Sometimes I put on clothes and think they are too femmy for me but I can't think of anything I have put on that was too dykey. I once bought some zena warrior princess earrings but I couldn't wear them because they dangled too much and I can't handle that.*  
(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

Presentation of self is situationally specific. A number of respondents were conscious of an altered presentation of self in certain circumstances. When asked if she was aware of presenting a lesbian identity to the world, one participant remarked:

*It depends on the situation. If I am going somewhere where the company would be mixed (say a feminist conference that would be most likely to be straight and gay) I would want to be as visible as possible, hopefully to meet other dykes. I would just try to be appropriate/relevant to the context of an all-queer group (i.e., activist meeting, bar etc.). If the situation would be one in which I would be most likely the only queer, I wouldn't think about my appearance so much because I assume that straight people wouldn't pick up on the codes as much.*  
(24 year old student and book store clerk, Mankato, Minnesota)

This comment emphasizes the dramaturgical qualities of staging a lesbian identity. In environments where there are not many visible lesbians, some lesbians feel they have less reason to present a lesbian identity (i.e., it will not be read). Others said that in heterosexually dominated spaces they sometimes downplay a lesbian identity or find themselves concealing it. Often these passing behaviours are partially unconscious.

*I try to be openly visibly “me” at all times. Since I spend much of my time in queer space or anonymous public spaces there are times when I am startled to find myself in a “straight” space—suddenly not using pronouns, for example, when speaking of my girlfriend. When I realize that I am doing that I try to be more open, and generally I am. The only factor that causes me to try to conceal my sexuality is physical safety. When I feel I am in a dangerous situation I don't offer up info, although I am still targeted due to my gender performance.*  
(25 year old student and receptionist, New York City)

Danger, risk, trust and safety were mentioned by a large proportion of the lesbians surveyed. While there has been a decrease in public realm violence or harassment towards visible lesbians in the decades since the gay rights movement began, in the context of a heterosexist society, there is always the potential for those who display a lesbian identity to be stigmatized and even to face danger.<sup>25</sup> Therefore the majority of lesbians must constantly assess whether to present a lesbian or straight front to the public world. Only a few of the participants in the study discussed intentionally concealing a lesbian identity, although most could relate specific times when they felt more self conscious revealing their sexual identity and tried to down play it.<sup>26</sup>

*Sometimes now (that I am with a woman) I feel like I am trying to conceal it when I am dressing to go out- trying to look more feminine (like wearing make-up and dresses, having long hair) when I know everyone will know I am a lesbian—just to say “and I am still feminine”.*  
(22 year old student and legal worker, Vancouver)

Several participants were not out to their families, even when they could be out in general public places. Even more were not out in their places of employment or at school. When asked how they deal with this situation, several detailed the ways in which they sometimes allowed their lesbian identity to be obvious in public places and other times tried to conceal it depending on who was with them. When asked how she tries to make her lesbian identity apparent or not apparent one participant said:

*Apparent: anywhere my parents are not. How? Just be myself.*  
*Not apparent: With my parents. How? Slightly alter gender performance toward femininity, longer hair (I prepare in advance), try to avoid eye contact and recognition from other homos.*  
(28 year old graduate student and T.A., Toronto)

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<sup>25</sup>In his study of the role of secrecy in stigmatized communities, George Simmel (1950) discussed the tension created by the necessity to conceal a stigma and the desire to confess it. I think Simmel's discussion is still relevant in that lesbians must balance two worlds: one that contains stigma and potential danger and the other which offers the potential to destigmatize and validate lesbian identity.

<sup>26</sup>Keep in mind study is based only on data gathered from 38 relatively out survey participants. Lesbians at the extreme end of the closeted scale might stay away from a study such as this one.

What are some of the impression management techniques used to express lesbian identity? How does the “*just be myself*” comment from the passage above translate into lesbian presentation of self? The reader will find that expressions given and received in lesbian impression management are based on the intricate symbolic system I have discussed as gaydar. The universe of appearance provides an arena for self-expression that many lesbians deliberately manipulate. Social actors are aware that, as “the self is dressed, it is simultaneously addressed” (Stone, 1990: 149). Lesbians, then, often deliberately clothe or adorn themselves in order to be addressed as lesbians by other lesbians. Analysis of the appearance cues offered by participants reveals that clothing can be extended to include hairstyle, make-up, jewellery, footwear and any deliberate expression from the appearential universe. The respondent who is quoted as “just being herself” to make her identity apparent remarks.

*I think that in many ways I fit a lesbian template all too well: white skin, short multicoloured hair, body pierced ears; geek glasses; dress like a boy often; little or no make-up; great shoes; (Ha! I read in Xtra that lesbians can be spotted by their great hair and great shoes-not sure I agree).*

(28 year old graduate student and T.A., Toronto)

If a lesbian’s self presentation fits “*the lesbian template*” then expressing a lesbian identity to the public world may appear effortless. Since lesbians often rely on first impressions to send cues to strangers about their sexual identity, easily read appearance cues are often used in designing a lesbian presentation of self. In the study, the most commonly used of these expressions was hairstyle. Lesbians who cut their hair in a clearly lesbian style said they had an easy time presenting themselves as lesbian.

*MY HAIR is one of the things about me that screams “dyke” ...short short short caesar cut – spikey at the front...boy cut.*

(32 year old graphic designer, Toronto)

Lesbians with long hair or more feminine appearances, however, felt that when they wanted to announce themselves as lesbian in public places they often had to highlight other expressions, as “just being themselves” was not enough. Jewellery or other paraphernalia (e.g., a double women’s symbol or rainbow rings) are often self-conscious, intentional, expressions used to convey a lesbian identity.

*Because I pass for straight (because I look like a femme, mother etc.) I appreciate being acknowledged in places outside of gay spaces. Clearly a double women’s symbol helps other lesbians connect with me in public places, which makes me feel better in terms of building strategic alliances.*

(40 year old home-based consultant, Ottawa)

As long hair is often read as heterosexual, many lesbians with longer hair found that they consciously chose another very solid lesbian signifier (“give-away” cue) in order to project the desired impression as lesbian or not straight. One of these give-away cues seems to be clunky footwear, mentioned repeatedly in the study. A lesbian bar will be filled at any time with femme lesbians who might look heterosexual at first glance but who are wearing army boots or clunky shoes with their feminine attire, often interpreted as a sure sign of lesbian identity. T-shirts are another deliberate self-presentation tactic. Especially when they expect to be in places where there will be other lesbians, lesbians often choose to wear t-shirts that will be read as lesbian.

*Well, without a doubt, My AniDifranco RICHEOUS BABE t-shirt gets ‘em everytime.*

(21 year old coffee shop employee, New York City)

*One of my favourite t-shirts has a cartoon image of Betty and Veronica Kissing with Archie on the sleeve looking dismayed. There are certainly times when I want people to notice that I am lez. On the most general tip, this is when I am feeling insecure or want to meet other women. I will wear my Betty and Veronica shirt and people take notice. Always I feel empowered by what I am wearing. (Never doubt the power of a good shirt! Clothes open all doors!)*

(32 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

Make up (or lack of it) was another intentional tactic of self-presentation mentioned often in the study. Several participants said that when they wanted to

conceal a lesbian identity they simply wore make up and people would assume they were straight.

*People tell me I've got an "androgynous appearance" (w/o make up of course), but w/makeup I'm all of a sudden....A CHINA DOLL (or geisha, whatever). I get reeeely stooopid comments from men who think I'm some kind of sexually starving accommodating Asian sex goddess.*  
(21 year old coffee shop employee, New York City)

For this participant choosing not to wear make up is as much about avoiding heterosexual advances as it is about being recognized as a lesbian. For many lesbians, not wearing make up, then, is a direct expression given. When asked if she thinks lesbians recognize her, another participant responded with:

*Typically no. But when I don't wear lipstick, have a fresh haircut and wear my librarian-looking glasses, I do look more dykey.*  
(23 year old graduate student, Mankato, Minnesota)

Another expression given to indicate a lesbian identity is the use of props. A common prop mentioned in the study was reading material. Several participants said they "openly read lesbian materials in public" (32-year-old ticketing manager, New York City) or will read queer magazines in coffee shops or on public transit. In looking at lesbian encounters, it will become evident that these props often act as openers to lesbian social engagements and thus serve not only as expressions given but also as interactional tools used to guide social interaction in a lesbian direction.

Conduct can exist as both an expression given or given off. Body language, including stance, demeanour, walk and taking up space is used in presenting a lesbian identity. In that lesbians are aware that they choose to present their lesbian identity through these body language choices, they exist as conscious expressions given.

*I choose to keep my hair short and wear androgynous clothing. And I walk with an air of confidence about myself as well. So it's not too difficult to pick me out of a crowd.*  
(42 year old publishing representative, Louisville)

*I have short/shaved hair. Stance and mannerism-I take up a lot of space and am assertive with my gestures, movements etc.*

(25 year old student and receptionist, New York City)

The use of behaviour to consciously signal identity is perhaps best illustrated with respect to more feminine appearing lesbians. Apparentially conspicuous (e.g., butch) lesbians can be identified by “just being” but less stereotypical lesbians often find that they must express themselves through their doings if they want to be seen as gay by the public world. The participant quoted below feels that in order to present herself as lesbian to the public world she must consciously design her conduct.

*I usually feel that I display a lesbian identity in public to those that pick up on my sometimes less than stereotypical energy and appearance. For many years I carried myself (presented) as a stereotypical dyke, accentuating every possible visual and spatial cue possible to ensure that I would be recognized by all members of the public. Interestingly, though, I now identify as a more femme lesbian, and it rarely occurs to me that I may appear straight. I have recently been surprised when mistaken for a straight or bisexual woman in public spaces. Currently I think my greatest identifier is the physical space I take up. Although I now identify as femme, wear make up and have grown my hair to a considerable length, I generally take up a great deal of energy or space in many public settings. I often have an open stance, very strong (I hesitate to say masculine) gait and sit most frequently with my legs apart. I also perceive my shoes to be a give-away. Regardless of femme attire I always wear “comfortable” (read: masculine or male-identified) shoes.*

(26 year old law student and legal researcher, Vancouver)

Lesbians often use a combination of appearential and behavioural cues to ensure that they give off the desired impression that they are lesbian. If their appearance does not seem to trigger another lesbian’s gaydar they will often activate behavioural expressions. They will consciously act in manners that will make them appear unmistakably lesbian. These behavioural expressions given will be discussed below as strategies of acknowledgement (e.g., eye contact, smiling and low-level flirting).

*I have short hair, wear little or no make-up, comfy clothes and comfy boyish shoes. I often make eye contact with women in public places and, if I’m in a good mood I flirt everywhere I go.*

(36 year old, freelance personal manager, New York City)

*There is enough about my appearance and the company I keep that my queerness would be evident to anyone who is paying attention. Then, if there is any doubt, I am a dyed-in-the-wool flirt, starting with strong eye contact, ability to bring on a deep voice and easy smile, lots of physical contact like arm touching. If the recipient is uncomfortable, then it's a strong indicator that she misread me or I misread her lesbian status.*

(41 year old professor, Winnipeg)

Goffman (1959) discussed the situations of "collusions" where two or more people work together to create an impression. Lesbian couples often collude to present a lesbian identity through public displays of affection. Together a couple projects a definition of the situation as a lesbian one. Many lesbians intentionally find themselves becoming more affectionate with their partners, or even lesbian friends, when in the presence of lesbian strangers.

*When I am with my girlfriend and we become aware that "a sista is among us," my girl is quick to hold my hand and represent. I wonder if her reaction stems from her lack of visibility, her being so fed up with people assuming she's straight, she jumps on the chance to feel visible, to gain recognition.*

(21-year-old coffee shop employee, New York City)

Verbal cues are also used as expressions given. Several less visible participants said they often deliberately outed themselves to strangers when they felt that their more subtle lesbian codes were missed. Considering that heterosexuals can be oblivious to the intricacies involved in reading lesbian identities, participants found that in order to present themselves as lesbian to a straight audience they had to be quite blatant.

*Sexuality is so invisible to our majority culture that unless there's talk about dating partners or sexual preference, I don't know that I send many clues to allow strangers to read me as lesbian.*

(26 year old student affairs administrator, Mankato, Minnesota)

Besides directly coming out about a lesbian identity there are verbal cues that lesbians use to portray their sexuality to lesbians. The most common indirect verbal cue mentioned in the study was a political attitude or what participants saw as a tendency to stand up for their beliefs. In discussing self-presentation, a number of participants said

that they always choose to be strong about their opinions. Accordingly, they saw this characteristic as a verbal expression of “subversive sexuality.”

*I feel that I try to uphold a strong lesbian presence in the way that I, well...present my strength! Being strong about what I believe in, testing society's norms, bustin' down barriers, not just "takin it", cause that is what wimmin were taught to do. Fuck that. When people witness me giving an argument or expressing my beliefs on certain issues, I definitely feel like my sexual identity is without question "wayward" to whoever's payin attention. Lesbians are too strong to go unnoticed (or should be).*

(21 year old coffee shop employee, New York City)

*I will unabashedly engage or join others in conversations about politics or religious issues that affect the lesbian/gay/female populations. I don't shy away from questions about my orientation. I think if they choose to talk about it, they already know the answer.*

(32 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

Discrete spoken cues are often used to signal a lesbian identity. Lesbians often use these cues to situationally alter their presentation of self in order to show solidarity with other lesbians. If the gay audience to which they are playing does not pick up their non-verbal presentations of self, they will use words to come out and build alliances.

*If I am in a place where I suspect there's a lesbian or gay man who might benefit from having someone to talk to, I'll be pretty clear. Like "my girlfriend and I..." or "I was at the gay community centre the other day..."*

(30 year old website producer, New York City)

As outsiders, lesbians are forced into dramaturgical awareness and thus many signals of self-presentation are conscious. However, the aura or bearing that I refer to as an intangible cue is not necessarily conscious but often exists as an expression given off that lesbians tune into when reading each other's identities. Respondents felt that lesbians give off this vibe, even when they are closeted or trying to conceal a lesbian identity. As the participants described it, and as I interpret it, this intangible essence has direct relevance to gender, specifically a defiance of gender norms. Since gender presentation is so pervasive in the cues lesbians both give and give off, I am obliged to discuss it in some detail as it relates to impression management.

### Presentation of Self: Gender Performance

It is impossible in a highly gendered society not to express a gender identity and not to have that gender read by others. Gender and sexuality are intricately linked. For the majority of heterosexuals, however, the presentation of a gendered self is largely unconscious. The fact that gender is performed in an elaborate system of impression management is often unobserved. A widespread assumption is that lesbians act and dress like men, whereas straight women are just being what comes naturally.

By definition, lesbian identity exists outside the societal gender norms, thus lesbians tend to be more conscious of gender performance than many straight women.<sup>27</sup> A collective awareness among lesbians of the significance of gender-related cues in lesbian presentation of self is evident through an examination of what constitutes gaydar signals. Appearance and behavioural cues are often tied to a visible defiance of gender norms. That is, many cues that are used to read a lesbian identity appear as masculine traits on a female body (e.g., lack of feminine apparel such as purses or make-up, or the wearing of boyish clothing) or masculine behaviour performed by female actors (e.g., strong stance, expansive arm movement or sitting with legs apart). In fact, it seems that gender and lesbian sexuality are so connected as to make analysing them separately impossible. The inseparability of gaydar and gender was implied in the data.

*Gaydar is a tricky term. What we pick up on is gender presentation, not "gayness". We know that gender expression and sexual orientation are not always congruent (we see masculine women married to men). On the other hand, there is a link between gender presentation and sexuality (and I typically identify women with a masculine gender presentation as lesbian). I can usually sniff-out the queers from a mile away.*

(23 year old student, Mankato, Minnesota)

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<sup>27</sup>I use the term gender performance to illustrate the staged quality of gender identity. That is, I see gender as an identity that is displayed through expressions given and given off. For an intricate theoretical analysis of lesbians and gender performance, see Judith Butler (1991).

Do gays and heterosexuals base gaydar readings solely on gender performance? A quick glance through the lists of appearance and behavioural cues suggests that the answer is yes. The majority of cues have a direct connection to gender. Specifically, the cues that lesbians pick up swiftly seem to represent gender-bending traits. A woman who defies norms of femininity in our culture is often read as a lesbian. However, gender cues are complex in the lesbian subculture and, if lesbians relied on a simplistic reading of gender (i.e., the presence or absence of a masculine front) to recognize lesbian strangers, then they would overlook the majority of lesbians in public places.

The study found a range of styles in terms of gender presentation.<sup>28</sup> Some lesbians design their presentation of self so that few people miss their gender-defying expressions given. Lesbians who design their appearances to look more masculine are referred to as “male-identified dykes,” “boy/girls,” “diesel-dykes,” or “butches.”

*I look like a dyke. Short hair, men's clothing. I have a butchness in all of me.*  
(44 year old student and bar tender, New York City).

Others designed their gender more femininely. Lesbians often refer to these women as “femmes” or “lipstick lesbians.” Many strangers, lesbian and straight, overlook the lesbian identity of femmes in public places.

*Actually I have always been quite feminine—an original “lipstick lesbian”, and many are surprised when they learn that I am a lesbian. If someone were to deduce that I am a lesbian, it most likely would be because of some obvious action on my part.*  
(51 year old teacher, New York City)

While gender presentation may seem merely a matter of stylistic choices, the study suggests that presentation of self around gender has interactional repercussions.

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<sup>28</sup> One participant identifies herself as transgendered. A tactic of self-presentation (expression given) that she has used has been to change her name from a feminine one to a masculine one.

Lesbians who present their gender as more masculine are much more likely to be recognized as lesbian by gay people and even by some straight people. In public places they are often mistaken for boys or men. Some get called “sir,” others get harassed and stared at in women’s washrooms or other public places.<sup>29</sup> Many lesbians who look like boys or men are stigmatized when straight strangers realize the mistake they have made. People feel that a mistaken gender reading requires “remedial work” (Goffman, 1959) and make comments that indicate a norm has been broken. Gender is an important identity guiding social interaction in a highly gender-dichotomized world and people are often upset when they have made an incorrect gender placement.

*I'd say the glares are often a give away when it is a straight person who has figured it out. Sometimes the whispers as they pass. The “sir” I often get when in a store is an obvious oversight—but a compliment in some respects. I look boyish and it doesn't bother me if they think I am a man, however it also means they are missing the fact of my sexual identity.*  
(31 year old graphic designer, Toronto)

As a visible gender-bending lesbian, I know the difference between a straight (mis) reading of my sex and a lesbian reading of my sexuality. Straight strangers I encounter often give me a second look that implies a “male or female?” questioning stare. They do not necessarily assume sexual orientation from gender presentation. The second look I receive from lesbians in public places usually indicates the “is she a dyke?” glance. Several participants had similar experiences.

*In terms of straight people....Lots of times I get mistaken for a man and get called sir. When I correct them I can sometimes see them figure it out. But then they are usually embarrassed. If they think I'm a guy they are probably not very hip or are homophobic.*  
(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

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<sup>29</sup> Gender misreads are made less often by lesbians than by straight people. As part of their prediscursive knowledge lesbians are aware of the difference between biological men and women who look like men.

That masculine-identified lesbians can be easily spotted by appearance (and behaviour) and that more feminine-identified ones must work harder to present their lesbian identity was a theme raised repeatedly in the study.

*I have a certain level of gaydar, although it is not refined or perfected. I am usually right on the money when it's a woman who is butch, but frankly my femme instinct is always wrong...I am not good at spotting femmes; they all look straight to me.*  
(31 year old graphic designer, Toronto)

Many participants do not accept this situation. They saw that femme invisibility resulted from the subculture's privileging of more visible (i.e., stereotypical) lesbians. The comment "*they all look straight to me*" may therefore be viewed as exclusionary and chauvinistic, representing a privileging of one style of lesbian presentation of self. Others stated that in order to read femme sexual identity lesbians had to be tuned in to subtler cues that were nevertheless clear signals of lesbian identity.

*In terms of my femme invisibility, I do experience some neglect from women I "tag" as lesbian. While I typically pass as straight, there are things about the way I look that would clue in any smart butch (or femme for that matter). I do take up more space than most women...I am as direct as they come (often approaching other lesbians); more subtle things might clue observant dykes in like my short spiky hair, glasses and definitely my body language.*  
(23 year old student, Mankato, Minnesota)

Many participants, especially those who see themselves as femme, refuse to believe that femme invisibility is only about looking straight. They argued that the sexism that pervades the dominant culture also exists in the lesbian community with the result that femmes are less valued in the lesbian subculture and therefore receive less public recognition from lesbian strangers and thus fewer shows of solidarity.

*I had an epiphany in sexuality class. It goes like this: femininity is a social construct right? It's a dress we wear, make up we put on. It's an image we put on over our basic humanity. But if we try to shed femininity and move towards androgyny in the style of more butch-leaning lesbians we actually tend to look more masculine. In this way, what is masculine is still the norm. So...those who aren't masculine/butch/gender blenders are the femmy ones. They are harder to tag. They have less visibility. They won't suffer as much discrimination, but they won't be seen by other dykes (or straight people) and challenge homophobia by their existence.*  
(24 year old, student and bookstore clerk, Mankato, Minnesota)

Femme invisibility and the privileging of more visible (read: butch) lesbians has been a common complaint in the lesbian subculture and it certainly was evident in the survey data. If we take seriously the comment that the overlooking of femmes represents a cultural privileging of masculinity, then we are obliged to seek a deeper analysis of gender cues; an analysis that takes more into account than merely looking for masculine traits on a female body.

What did the study offer that was new about gender and impression management? Looking beyond stereotypes, I suggest it is possible to discern a lesbian-specific style of gender defiance that is more complex than the adoption of masculine traits. This self-presentation style is expressed by a range of lesbians from very butch to very femme. Consider the following passage from a participant attempting to articulate this trait in her reading of a “straight-looking woman”.

*Femmes can be trickier. However I did see a poster one day with a woman on it who had long hair and was fairly straight looking. I thought immediately that she was a lesbian, and when I met her in person had that suspicion confirmed. So what were her cues? I'm not sure. Something in her gaze, the way she held her head, her confidence, her smile.*  
(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

What were the cues picked up by this participant as she tried to place the sexual identity of a “straight-looking” woman? What was the “something in her gaze”? How were her “suspicions” confirmed? I suggest that the respondent above detected the intangible essence that most of the participants mentioned in some form or another. This essence is detected at the level of prediscursive consciousness and for this reason is difficult to describe. This characteristic exists as an expression given off but is born of a conscious decision about presentation of self. Consider the following comment from a femme-identified lesbian.

*I know that I consciously design my life so that I avoid some of the trappings of woman-ness through daily decisions about hairstyle (short and easy to maintain) clothing (fits to allow movement) and adornment (no make-up, little or no jewellery) so that I can function and not be reminded of my role in the heterosexual economy.*

(26 year old student and student affairs administrator, Mankato, Minnesota)

Participants from all parts of the butch-femme style spectrum say that their self-presentation involves rejection of the dominant gender codes. Sometimes this attitudinal variable is visible in clothing and conduct and other times it is subtler.

Consider the following scenario from my field notes.

*When I was in an office at the university getting some paper work done, I heard a woman talking in the hallway outside the door. Her voice had the intangible quality to it that many lesbians describe. When she walked around the corner I saw that she was very feminine in appearance. In my mind I re-defined her as a heterosexual woman as appearentially she gave no cues of a lesbian identity. However, I was struck by the way she held her pen and I remember thinking that no straight woman would hold her pen that way. I have difficulty describing what exactly it was in the way she held her pen that gave me that impression except that it was not a feminine gesture. I caught her looking at me and as I turned to her she looked in my eyes and said hello. I knew then that she had read me as lesbian and this confirmed my suspicions that she was also a lesbian. The "ritual acknowledgement" of the eye contact confirmed what the very slight cue of voice and even slighter cue of the pen holding had raised.*  
(Fieldnotes)

This experience illustrates the contingency of the role-making process and the power of minute expressions given off guiding that process.

Combined with other signifiers, this intangible essence becomes a powerful cue. Described by one participant as an attempt to avoid "*the trappings of woman-ness*," it becomes clear that this essence takes on a political tone. Being a lesbian means defying the assumption behind heterosexuality that objectifying women is a male prerogative. Since lesbians design their appearance, for the most part, for a female rather than a male gaze, the institution of heterosexuality is challenged simply through the presentation, blatant or subtle, of a lesbian self to the public world.

Popular culture and some academic literature make the assumption that lesbians are more masculine because there is something inherently male-identified in the

identity. Being sexually attracted to women is a male prerogative in a heterosexual society and thus women who desire other women are viewed as male-identified by definition. My study suggests a more sociological possibility. If being a lesbian is seen as a subversive act of rejecting compulsory heterosexuality (and the rigid male/female dichotomy that this institution necessitates) then it follows that defying the dominant gender code is a political statement against institutionalized heterosexuality. Historically, this political attitude has evolved into an elaborate symbolic system in the lesbian subculture. Even though some lesbians are not overtly political, this subcultural ideology guides lesbian customs and hence self-presentation styles. Thus a sometimes very subtle trait of gender-bending often exists as an intangible cue that lesbians give off, even when they consciously design their appearance in a more feminine manner.

Indeed an increased tendency to gender blend or play with gender has developed in the lesbian subculture, probably because lesbians are less likely to fear the disapproval and resulting stigmatization that results from presentation of unfeminine traits. In the dominant heterosexual culture the stigma of "butch" or "dyke" has been traditionally used to label women who stray too far from gender norms. If a lesbian is out and presents a lesbian identity to the world, then it is less likely that fear of being labelled sexually deviant will be a factor in the way she designs her presentation of self. Even women who see themselves as femme often play with femininity. Lesbians, as already outside the gendered order, may be freer to engage in gender parody or to perceive the drama embedded in gender. For this reason, I was not surprised to find that many survey respondents said they often altered or switched their gender presentation,

sometimes playing up a masculine gender identity and other times playing up a feminine gender identity.

The study suggested then, that lesbians may display a deep-rooted, subculturally specific, nonchalance about femininity that is found more rarely in heterosexual women. As lesbians looking to signal and receive in the symbolic system of gaydar, this attitude of detachment from gender norms is a fundamental cue. Thus even lesbians who look straight at first glance can be detected on the gaydar because they give off this trait that signifies a non-attachment to norms of femininity.

Lesbians are socialized in the same dominant gender schema as straight women but have often rejected these dominant gender codes (albeit selectively) as they become socialized into the lesbian subculture. The lesbian subculture has its own appearance norms. Over the last four decades these appearance norms have come to be based on a rejection of dominant gender codes. While there are at present a diverse array of lesbian subcultures and much contesting of early norms of appearance in lesbian culture, there remains, I suggest, a collective memory of the importance of gender defiance as a code of recognition.

### **3. Strategies of Acknowledgement**

Carl Couch (1989) outlines the basic processes of sociation. Three of Couch's concepts are useful in analysing public interaction between lesbians. These are co-presence, reciprocal attentiveness and social responsiveness. Co-presence is established when two people are aware that they constitute part of the other's conceptual field. Awareness must be mutual (although it can be unintentional) or co-presence is not

established. Lesbians reading each other's identity cues are engaged in co-presence. Reciprocal attentiveness requires at least a minimum degree of intentional activity, although it can be fleeting.<sup>30</sup> This process occurs as people move from merely being conscious of each other to directly attending to each other. The actions described as acknowledgment strategies are instances of reciprocal attentiveness. If an opening exists, reciprocal attentiveness can move on to become social responsiveness. When strangers are mutually socially responsive they indicate that the other is worthy of attention and selves become merged, even if only momentarily. I refer to socially responsive situations between lesbians as spontaneous engagements or encounters.

The survey asked lesbians to describe their responses to women they read as lesbian or the responses they received from women they read as lesbian. In public places, I recorded instances of stranger interaction between myself and other lesbians over the period that the study took place. The following is an exchange that my girlfriend and I had with another lesbian couple as we passed each other on a city sidewalk. I shared this exchange with participants as part of the actual questionnaire in order to initiate dialogue with them about these interactional episodes.

*In New York, my partner and I were walking, holding hands, down a busy East Village sidewalk. We passed a couple of lesbians. All four of us exchanged quick (knowing) glances. The more Femme looking one held my gaze for a prolonged moment and smiled. I remarked, jokingly, to my partner that she must have liked me. A few seconds after we passed each other, we all turned our heads to look back at each other. Being caught in the act of obvious recognition was both exhilarating and a bit embarrassing. My partner called out "Hey, she's mine." We all laughed and then kept on our way. This passing exchange, so minute that most people on the street would not notice it, created a surge of validation for four lesbians on a New York City sidewalk. In a world surrounded by heterosexual norms, complete strangers shared a moment of "queer pride."*

(Fieldnotes)

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<sup>30</sup>If only one interactant notices another, "unilateral attentiveness" (Couch, 1989) is established. This situation describes gaydar overlooks where a lesbian notices another lesbian but does not receive any return attention.

There was nothing exceptional about this exchange. In a city as busy as New York, it was an almost routine type of engagement. This does not mean it was commonplace; rather it was not something into which either of us put much thought, although we did enjoy the moment. The incident involved only a mild breaching of norms of civil inattention and perhaps, a moment of lesbian solidarity. In fact, several respondents wrote that they also had experienced exchanges like this one.

*I have actually had several experiences similar to the one given here. It is an amazing feeling to connect this way on a crowded street. Unfortunately I am having trouble remembering the details. I think I have begun to take them for granted--public connections, acknowledgements. Realizing this is both a relief (I feel confident in my dyke identity and in my connections to other lesbians) and a little distressing in that I want to be aware of and honour these experiences.*  
(25 year old student and receptionist, New York City)

When I wrote about the experience on the New York City sidewalk, I was not yet aware of how many lesbian-specific interaction rituals were included in this brief exchange. I was aware that what had passed between the four of us on that street was possibly compelled by an urge to build solidarity with other lesbians; this had been the hypothesis when I started the research. In terms of specifics of interaction between lesbians, however, I had only vague unformed ideas. Five lesbian acknowledgement rituals were played out in that brief exchange: prolonged eye contact, smiling, low level flirting, covert looking back, and brief words. The following statement captures most of these rituals in one paragraph, including the dilemma that I will refer to as “studious non-acknowledgment.” It illustrates the interconnections between the various rituals.

*It is all in the eyes! Initially eye contact and then a subtle smile. If possible, then a longer look to figure out why I think she is or isn't. If I am with another queer person, then we play the “is she or isn't she” game. If it is at all appropriate in the setting, I will engage in low level flirting. Some lesbians of course carefully avoid any acknowledgment but those who have, at least, some comfort with who they are make eye contact, smile knowingly, nod hello.*  
(41 year old professor, Winnipeg)

### Eye Contact

Lesbians attending to each other's cues in public places are in situations of co-presence. When eye contact is made between them the most basic form of reciprocal attentiveness ensues. Georg Simmel has argued that eye contact has a "uniquely sociological function" and that mutual eye contact is "perhaps the most direct and purest reciprocity which exists anywhere" (1970: 301). In one of the simplest gestures, then, the most profound messages are sent. In order to understand the difference between routine stranger eye contact and lesbian stranger eye contact, Goffman's concept of civil inattention is relevant. Civil inattention is Goffman's term for the interactional ritual in which trust and mutual respect is routinely secured in instances of co-presence between strangers. As people in urban environments approach each other civil inattention takes

the special form of eyeing the other up to approximately eight feet during which time sides of the street are apportioned by gesture, then casting the eyes down as the other passes—a kind of dimming of the lights...we have here what is perhaps the slightest of interpersonal rituals, yet one that constantly regulates the social intercourse of persons in our society. (1963: 84)

Routine gestures, like a brief moment of eye contact and then looking away, convey a deeply meaningful message to strangers. Collectively these messages make living in cities and social order a possibility. In this quick scanning of a stranger's eyes, we assess the safety of the situation and convey respect for the sacredness of the other's self (i.e., ritual deference). The equally unconscious "dimming of the lights" conveys that we mean no ill intent and do not intend to turn the other into an object by invading her personal space (i.e., by staring). In this fleeting moment of ritual deference,

occurring countless times every day in public places, strangers exchange their vows to participate in the micro maintenance of the macro moral order.

Civil inattention is a generic concept which can be applied to heterogeneous people in urban places. When looked at more closely, we find that civil inattention is laced with power dynamics (Lofland, 1995). For example, it has been shown that civil inattention is most likely to be breached by those in positions of power (i.e., adults over children, men over women) and that people with visible stigmas bear the brunt of breached civil inattention in public places (Davis, 1961). However, the literature is sparse in dealing with the forms that civil inattention takes in situations where people from less visible marginalized subcultures (e.g., gay people) encounter each other in public places. In other words, the positive effects or functions of breaching civil inattention have not been systematically explored.

Eye contact was mentioned by all of the participants. They suggested that civil inattention is altered slightly when lesbians are co-present. At the minimum, a lesbian version of civil inattention involves merely a slightly longer gaze. Despite the apparent simplicity of this ritual and its brevity, the message is profound and the effects in guiding social action are enormous. When asked how they think lesbians respond to each other in public places the following are a few basic answers involving eye contact.

*Eye contact is held longer with lesbians than with straight women.*  
(46 year old letter carrier and massage therapist, Winnipeg)

*Eye contact is the most important cue. If another woman makes eye contact and holds it for a second longer than normal, I think there is a good chance that she is a lesbian.*  
(41 year old professor, Winnipeg)

*If I am passing a lesbian on the street (someone I assume to be) if they engage in prolonged/intense eye contact, I assume they think I am a lesbian.*  
(46 year old communications co-ordinator, Winnipeg)

The folk terms for this slightly longer eye contact included “the knowing look,” “the prolonged glance,” or the “lingering gaze.” In a very short period of time, lasting only a second or two, lesbians convey in “the look” that a secret knowledge is shared.

Respondents described those brief prolonged eye contacts as thrilling for that reason.

*Seeing dykes conjures up feeling of pleasure, delight, a sense of power that we know something about each other that maybe other people on the street don't recognize –or if they recognize it they are not part of it.*

(41 year old corporate director, Winnipeg)

*I enjoy seeing other dykes/gaywomen in unexpected places...like I am an active club member. Its kinda neat knowing this weird thing about a stranger, and her knowing it of you, but no one else around knowing anything.*

(33 year old graduate student, Toronto)

One way that lesbians assess the accuracy of a gaydar reading is by assessing the type and length of eye contact they receive from a stranger. Eye contact, then, is both a behavioural cue of recognition and an action of acknowledgment. In the scenario below, eye contact is the only discernable cue available, however it is such a powerful cue that it is enough to solidify a reading. This finding, I suggest, indicates the possibility for lesbian contacts to take place in the absence of more visible cues and to bridge the gap created by diversity in social status.

*My first experience recognizing a lesbian came about when I was 16 years old. I had been kicked out of geography class for goofing around and had decided to organize my locker. A new teacher had come to our school that year. All the adolescent boys were nuts about her. She dressed femmy, had a good figure and long blond hair. On this particular day I was in the empty hall going through my locker when she came out of her classroom. It was just she and me in the hallway. I looked up at her and our eyes locked. And I knew, and I knew that she knew. I was almost knocked over with the surprise of it all. I started to laugh and she started to laugh and we just stood there in the hallway smiling and laughing and seeing each other. The bell rang and the hallway filled with students. So what was it? It wasn't her look or anything she wore. It wasn't situational, the high school hallway. It was the way she looked at me. Like she knew who I was. Like we shared something. It was also wild to know this thing that I was sure no one else in the school knew. That she was willing to let herself be recognized by recognizing me. That was my first real experience with recognizing a lesbian stranger: it was strange and joyful. Later when I told my gay friends about the experience, I couldn't really explain how I knew, but I was and still am 100% certain. I knew because she told me [in the way she looked at me].*

(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

Few lesbians, I suspect, would read this story without emotion. These moments, described so lucidly by the participant, capture the essence and depth of what gaydar means to many lesbians and the purposes it serves in creating a sense of identity and solidarity. Neither of the lesbians in the scenario was out, in the full meaning of the term and yet they shared an "ecstatic moment" (Berger, 1963) placing them beyond the norm and outside their day-to-day life.

Eye contact is the most significant interaction ritual, because if eye contact between lesbians is made, then other recognition strategies often follow. According to the data, the following forms of interaction indicating reciprocal awareness are performed after eye contact is made: nodding, smiling, checking out and greeting. These rituals follow eye contact and cannot be made without it. The exception is the subtle "check out" which can take place without direct eye contact depending on how close one is to the suspected lesbian. Low-level flirting, another interaction ritual of acknowledgment, is slightly more spontaneous than nodding, smiling, checking out or brief words but, as I will show, the messages it conveys, the way it is interpreted and the fact that it is often almost unconscious, mark it as a lesbian interaction ritual.

### The Nod

A critical reader might wonder what is unusual about a nod. Strangers nod to each other regularly in public places. However, studies of social interaction suggest that, in cities, people rarely nod to each other without an "opening". If we nodded at every stranger we encountered we would have to spend a lot of time at the chiropractor. As a rule, social actors practice civil inattention with strangers but save nods for exceptional

(albeit minutely exceptional) circumstances. One such appropriate situation is an encounter between lesbian strangers.

Participants describe “the nod” as a custom of acknowledgement between lesbian strangers. The nod solidifies the possibility of mutual validation that a moment of prolonged eye contact raises. Eye contact signals that we have read each other’s sexual identities; the nod extends that moment into more conscious mutual acknowledgement. Almost three quarters of the participants mention nodding. Several refer to it as “the nod” or “the acknowledgment nod,” indicating both its ritual characteristics and its unique lesbian attributes.

*Personally when I come across someone who I think is a lesbian, I will make eye contact. If the eye contact is returned the “acknowledging nod” will follow.*  
(44 year old student and bartender, New York City)

*“The nod”—is actually a reverse nod, which indicates hello/acknowledgement.*  
(25 year old social services worker, Winnipeg)

The nod, it has been suggested, is specifically meant to seal a placement. It is different from the smile or a verbal acknowledgment. The smile has more flirtatious undertones and often conveys a shared understanding of the subversiveness of the secret. Saying hello takes the acknowledgment a step further. But the nod is specifically a “*nod of acceptance*” (27 year old Via Rail attendant, Winnipeg). It says; “I know you are a lesbian and you know that I am too.”

### The Smile

The third most common ritual acknowledgment is “the smile,” mentioned by about 70% of the participants. All instances of reciprocal attentiveness between lesbian strangers involve eye contact but the smile brings the interaction momentarily into

social responsiveness. Smiling is not an uncommon public realm interaction ritual, as many strangers will find situations in which to go beyond civil inattention and smile at a stranger. The smile however, like the nod, has specific characteristics which define it as a lesbian interaction ritual.

*Eye contact is followed by a knowing smile. This is the number one contact detail. This confirms everything. Although it is a very particular kind of smile. It's not as if everyone who smiles at me is a lesbian, there's a knowingness in the smile, an acknowledgement.*  
(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

Participants interpret the smile as knowing, I think, because it reveals the existence of shared subversiveness. This quality of knowingness, then, seems to be a cue lesbians use to decode the meaning of the smiles they receive from women in public places.

The study raised the interesting possibility that there are situationally specific smiles in lesbian encounters. In a situation where lesbians might feel vulnerable, the smile might be supportive as in the statement below from a more closeted lesbian who smiles to set a lesbian stranger at ease.

*Generally I try to indicate that they can relax. A smile can go a long way.*  
(51 year old teacher, New York City)

This participant feels vulnerable as a lesbian in public and uses the smile to reassure other lesbians of her lack of ill intent (i.e., "outing" them). Other participants said that the smile is most important when lesbians see each other in places where lesbians are not the norm (e.g., straight spaces). In this way, the smile conveys the pleasure of sharing an unexpected moment of connection.

*I always try to catch their eye and smile especially if I am in a place that is not a place where lesbians rule. I think that in these places many women smile with a special twinkle in their eyes.*  
(36 year old freelance personal manager, New York City)

Sometimes the smile is merely an extension of the nod. When the smile accompanies the acknowledgment nod (or replaces it) in this way, it tends to be a toothless smile, not really a smile but a pressing of the lips together. It is the smile version of the acknowledging nod. In more playful situations, however, the smile is almost a smirk or grin and has flirtatious undertones. In this case, teeth are often shown and there is a certain playful knowingness conveyed in the smile. Sometimes the smile will be accompanied by a wink. Like the smile, the wink is meant to convey knowingness and thus occurs when a lesbian wants to make the lesbian connection more apparent.

#### Brief Words

Brief words exchanged between lesbians are common occurrences and hence I have categorized them as a lesbian ritual of acknowledgment. In urban settings the norm is usually not to speak with strangers, however assessment of mutual lesbian identity often provides an opening which renders routine the exchange of brief words between lesbians. These utterances (e.g., hello or hey), then, when occurring between lesbian strangers convey a deeper meaning than a simple greeting.

The concept of a ritualistic exchange of greetings with other lesbians was mentioned by about 60% of the participants. Interestingly, almost as many expressed a desire to start conversations following these greetings. I think this implies a strong link between ritual action and more spontaneous action. Several participants say they notice lesbians are, in general, more open and casual with each other. Lesbians often use this slight familiarity as a verbal (behavioural) cue in assessing sexual identity and assessing

whether they have been read as lesbian. Consider two comments by lesbians who work in retail establishments.

*When I am at work and women make a point of making eye contact or they're more conversational in a casual way, rather than just a quick business transaction between strangers, then I think they are lesbians.*

(28 year old convenience store assistant, Winnipeg)

*I always try to be extra nice to the dykes who check-out at my register (give them free stuff, talk more, flirt, etc.) There is a lot of negativity and homophobia out there, so I smile and make eye contact a lot. Sometimes I try to start conversation if it is reasonable...I think that dykes act nonchalant and ambivalent to straight people but get bashful with me (especially in my service jobs).*

(24 year old student and bookstore clerk, Mankato, Minnesota).

These quotes demonstrate that lesbians might interpret the responses of lesbians differently. Comparing the two passages, one respondent implies that lesbians get bashful around each other and the other that they are more casual. Either way, it is clear that lesbians serving the public are often attempting to read customers as lesbian and that when they make a reading their actions are changed. Most often the exchange of words between lesbian strangers takes the form of a brief uttered greeting. Participants, however, point out that they also try to engage in small talk with women they suspect are lesbians, if the opportunity presents itself. When the words are brief I categorize these exchanges as ritual acknowledgment. When a verbal exchange goes beyond a standard greeting, it is no longer ritualistic and becomes spontaneous exchange.

### Low-level Flirting

More than a dozen participants mentioned flirting as both a recognition cue and form of acknowledgement. Flirting, like all actions found in lesbian interaction rituals (eye contact, smiling, nodding, greetings), is not restricted to the lesbian subculture. In terms of lesbian interaction rituals, however, the meanings that flirting convey are

subculturally specific. I began to formulate the idea that flirting was a lesbian interaction ritual when one respondent listed “*willingness to engage in low level flirting*” (41 year old professor, Winnipeg) as a behavioural cue. Other terms that were used by participants (e.g., “slight flirtations” or “friendly flirting”) also indicated that flirting is a subtle interaction ritual that lesbians use to send signals to each other.

What is low-level flirting and how does it differ from other types of flirting (e.g., cruising for dates or sex)? Low-level flirting is not necessarily sexual in intent. “Intentional flirting” involves more conscious sexual motives. Low-level flirting, I suggest, can be unconscious and exists as a validation strategy more than a pick up strategy. When I sent out a message to my participants questioning this concept I received a number of replies that reinforced what the data suggested.

*My partner is often uncomfortable with what she calls a “change” in my personality when I encounter dykes I don’t know. She says I flirt like crazy and I know it’s true. But in general it has little to do with wanting to be sexual and much more to do with connection, solidarity...acknowledging one another.*

(25 year old student and receptionist, New York City)

*This business of flirting is quite brilliant...just as I was walking to the library I whistled at another lesbian that I know (and do not want), I think you are on to something...would you believe, I am at a movie theatre by myself and the shorthaired “popcorn girl” just winked at me. There’s a connection! Now I can’t buy popcorn...”*

(28 year old Ph.D. student and T.A., Toronto)

*As for the flirtation issue, I think it stems really from wanting the other person to know that we aren’t straight, that we are in the same sexual mode as the person we are flirting with. I think it helps cement the connection, however brief. If we walk away with a new friend or telephone number, so much the better. But for the moment if we have made an impression on our peers, we have validated ourselves in this het-oriented world. We’re not alone. We are still attractive to others and so on. Everyone (gay/straight/bisexual) is looking for validation of their personal right to exist. If [as lesbians] we can find that ego burst in flirting, we flirt.*

(33 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

This last passage raises an interesting question. Do heterosexuals engage in flirting to validate their sexual orientation, since, as the participant states: “*Everyone, (gay/straight/bisexual) is looking for validation of their personal right to exist*”? Indeed

everyone needs to validate her “*right to exist*” and clearly identities must be mutually validated. However, the existence of a strong heterosexual norm means that heterosexuals do not need to work on their “*right to exist*” as heterosexual identity is constantly reinforced in everyday life. Socialization, media and cultural images confirm the heterosexual norm constantly. Lesbian sexuality is still taboo in our culture and largely invisible. Difficulty validating lesbian sexual identity on an everyday basis, then, may be one reason why lesbians use public realm flirting as a solidarity strategy.

Low-level flirting is a pivotal interaction ritual partly because lesbian identity is, after all, a sexual identity. In very slight exchanges of sexual energy, lesbians in public places confirm their status as “sexual outlaws,” and in the same process make possible their subversive sexuality.<sup>31</sup> Since women are not socialized to flirt with each other, low-level flirting is a subversive and political act. Low-level interactional flirting between women, then, is one of the non-intimate ways that lesbians create sexual possibility in everyday public realm transactions.

In discussing the strategic use of flirting, I do not dismiss the sexual energy created by flirting. Very slight flirtations can be exhilarating coming from or directed at a stranger. Lesbians do flirt with strangers they find attractive, straight or gay. The following statement indicates that flirting is both about sexual pleasure and recognition.

*My most frequent response to meeting other lesbians in public depends on the context of said meeting. Almost always I'll make eye contact and smile. If I am single and unsupervised and want to make a “connection” I will flirt. I don't pay much attention to boys on the street but I have been known to openly cast an appreciative glance at a pretty girl walking down the street regardless of her perceived sexual orientation (but NEVER in front of my partner!).*  
(32 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

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<sup>31</sup>Since becoming a participant observer for this study and through engaging in conceptual analysis of the study data, I have grown more aware of the types of signals I have been receiving and sending for years (e.g., winks, slow smiles, touching, longer eye contact, raising eyebrows and sexual innuendos).

There are two related reasons for low-level flirting. First is the sexual pleasure it creates in a society that denies this kind of pleasure between women. Second, flirting is part of a process of identity building. That is, it is an expression given to imply mutual knowledge of another's sexuality. Flirting, however, can also be an expression given off. The following scenario illustrates how flirting is used as both a cue to signal lesbian identity and a strategy to indicate acknowledgment. The comment shows how this process is not always entirely conscious.

*The evening of the first day I looked at this survey, the following exchange happened: I was in Ottawa for a prestigious, professional conference. On the way to the opening reception...I met my boss in the hotel lobby. He introduced me to "Jane", who was also going to the conference. She said, "Oh you are (my name)" with some interest and surprise. I didn't immediately think "lesbian", for interest could have been feigned or polite. However, given her reaction, I did notice her sensible shoes, direct eye contact, deep voice, absence of make-up and jewellery and of feminine details (we were after all going to an evening reception which verged on formal) and all these things made me think "maybe." Then as soon as she could say something privately, she said "I want you. I mean, I wanted to meet you." Then she said "We have a date Friday night." She enjoyed my bewilderment for a moment. Then she said "Mary and 'Sal' (who share our professional affiliation but who is 'Sally' to all except close lesbian friends) invited me for dinner too." So her appearance, low level flirting (which she subsequently told me she was completely unaware of--she said she didn't even realize I was a lesbian until the dinner party) and most telling of all, use of 'Sal's' familiar name were all marks of lesbian identity for me even though she was a total stranger to me.*  
(41 year old professor, Winnipeg)

The two women in the encounter engaged in the many of strategies of recognition and acknowledgment I have discussed. The participant used appearance and behavioural cues in assessing "Jane's" sexual identity. Jane's initial verbal responses were not sufficient to make a placement but appearance made her think "maybe." Jane's sexual identity, however, was placed once low-level flirting was engaged in. The initial behavioural cues (verbal enthusiasm, low voice) raised suspicion, were fortified by appearance cues (lack of formal clothes, sensible shoes) and cemented by further behavioural cues (low-level flirting and more verbal cues).

It is perhaps significant that while the participant was taking in the cues, perhaps more consciously than usual as she had "*just looked at the survey,*" Jane claimed not to be aware of her own behaviour or to have noticed the participant's lesbian identity. This claim raises the possibility that lesbians sometimes engage in such behaviours somewhat unconsciously. Until confronted by the participant at the dinner party, Jane had not given any thought to the flirtatious nature of leaning over to a stranger and saying "*I want you...we have a date on Friday night.*" The survey data did suggest, though not always as clearly as the above scenario, that many times lesbians are not totally aware of the subtle ways in which they act differently in front of women they suspect are lesbian.<sup>32</sup>

Goffman has argued that there is an intense pressure for people in co-presence to define a situation similarly. When there is risk involved people are much less likely to breach norms of propriety. It is much riskier to make a flirtatious comment or even to wink than it is to engage in prolonged eye contact or to give the lesbian nod. Flirting, then, often occurs after the subtler or less risky forms of acknowledgement have been made (e.g., prolonged eye contact). These moments of "reciprocal attentiveness" open the possibility for "social responsiveness" (i.e., flirting). Flirting between women, no matter when it takes place, boldly highlights lesbian sexuality in a heterosexist society. In this way flirting is about more than sex and more than solidarity. It is an example of what Peter Berger (1963) refers to as an "ecstatic moment" in which social actors engage in activities that exist outside the structures of the "okay world."

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<sup>32</sup>I have become aware of this since many of the participants I stay in contact with have informed me how much doing this survey has changed their way of looking at these situations. They have developed dramaturgical awareness in becoming more conscious of the ways they recognize and respond to lesbians in public places.

### The Subtle Check-out

The lesbian interaction ritual that I refer to as the “subtle check out” exists as a link between ritual recognition and ritual acknowledgment. This ritual often occurs in the assessment phase (i.e., during co-presence) as lesbians try to determine a woman’s sexual identity but it also involves certain ritual movements that get used as behavioural cues. According to participants, these ritual movements involve a form of “looking back” or “looking twice” or “subtle glancing”.

*I can tell someone is a lesbian if she checks me out in that way... If we are passing on the street, we do that: “Is she? Is she?” Stare as we pass. If I am actually interacting with her, I’ll smile and try to figure out if she really is a lesbian.*  
(30 year old website producer, New York City)

*When passing another womyn who might be questioning “Is she or isn’t she,” I will give a definitive glance. This glance is to indicate, “I see you and yes I am family.”*  
(30 year old special education teacher, New York City)

The phrase “is she or isn’t she?” was used by seven participants. This “is she?” look involves “*slyly checking each other out when we think the other isn’t looking*” (28 year old convenience store clerk, Winnipeg). Or as one Toronto resident put it:

*If you catch a woman looking at you (twice or in a way cautious but lingering way—apart from the ‘through you’ stares of public transit) then it is a signal that you are being checked out and read as queer or whatever.*  
(37 year old Ph.D. student, Toronto)

Looking back or taking a second look in this sly way is a behavioural cue. Being caught doing it blatantly can be embarrassing, however, because it is supposed to be subtle. The study also indicated that in groups, lesbians tend to be much less subtle about this check-out. As one participant pointed out, when she is with other “queers” the “sly check-out” goes from a cautious and covert action to a playful “is she or isn’t she?” game. Couples or groups of friends often have invented names and responses for

this “dyke spotting” ritual.<sup>33</sup> When lesbians in groups or couples spot other lesbians, they represent what Goffman called a “team.” Several lesbians in the study indicated that they tended to “*take their partner’s hand*” when passing lesbians to say, “*look we are lesbians too*” (30 year old pilot and record store clerk, Vancouver).

Perhaps due to the awkwardness that exists when strangers breach norms of propriety and gaze at each other, many lesbians say they do not always feel comfortable being checked out. One participant said that she found that lesbians often “*look away nervously*” when they find themselves the object of “*the subtle check-out*” (25 year old social services worker, Winnipeg). This nervousness may produce a situation that is as likely to close the possibility of further interaction as to open it.

*Sometimes there’s just weirdness ya know. Like there’s a woman in the room who I think might be lesbian, oooh, ohhh, I must approach her, uhhh, I have to exchange a glance with her! Something! ANYTHING! There’s a lesbian what do I do! I just feel allota times lesbians have a difficult time just being human around each other, not so darn nervous.*  
(21 year old coffee shop employee, New York City)

Personality factors come into play in the way lesbians engage each other in public places. As a group it is possible to generalize about lesbian actions in public places but at the individual level personality is always relevant. One participant in the study mentioned that she felt it was inappropriate to be too blatant when checking out lesbians.

*I am quite shy, I haven’t ever done anything other than smile at a woman in passing who I thought was a lesbian, to me, if I said something it would be intrusive or rude.*  
(48 year old social worker, Australia)

Another participant worried about the political correctness of the “check out”.

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<sup>33</sup>One participant said that she elbows her partner and says “GL” (gay lady) when a lesbian stranger is spotted. About 10 years ago lesbians I knew in Winnipeg used to utter a subtle “beep beep” to each other to indicate the radar was going off. I heard that 20 years ago they used to say “stamped” to each other when they saw lesbians in public (presumably to indicate that she had been stamped as gay). There are probably many variations on the terminology of this game, locally and regionally.

*There is, of course, THAT LOOK...It can range from the "double take" to the full "elevator eye." Due to the strong feminist presence in our lesbian community, I try to avoid the elevator eye technique in fear of being accused of "objectifying" my fellow fine sistas.*  
(22-year-old coffee shop employee, New York City)

This last point, that lesbians sometimes try not to look at other lesbians (or appear to ignore them) raises the issue of studied non-acknowledgment.

### Studious Non-acknowledgment

We come to a dilemma or what at first appeared to be a contradiction in the research findings. That is, that ignoring (or "*looking away nervously*") is a ritualistic form of lesbian interaction. When I first began my work as a participant observer in this study, I noticed a curious phenomenon. Some women I had pegged as lesbian engaged with me in the ways I have described as ritual acknowledgment. Others looked right past me and not only avoided my eyes (and hence any shows of solidarity) but also did not seem to notice that I existed at all. I struggled with this dilemma and on more than one occasion had decided that lesbians treated each other no differently than other people in public places and that my research was, quite possibly, fatally misguided. Frustrated, I was tempted to say to an obvious lesbian who ignored me: "excuse me aren't you supposed to look in my eyes and nod or smile?" Fortunately, analysis of the data brought clarity to this apparent contradiction.

Many participants also noticed this situation and commented on it. In the first survey that was returned to me, I found five words in answer to the question "How do you think that lesbians respond to other lesbians in public places?" The words were "*perhaps with excitement and fear*" (24 year old rock singer and song writer, New York

City).<sup>34</sup> Initially, I put this idea away from me because I was not sure what this respondent meant by the seemingly contradictory terms “*excitement and fear*.” The next survey returned was equally curious. This 44 year old bartender from New York City answered the question with: “*I think they withdraw and ignore*.” This same respondent also made the following comment about the way she personally reacts to lesbians she sees in public places, regardless of whether they “*ignore and withdraw*” from her.

*I always say hi to dykes passing me on the street. Also, I try to maintain eye contact and say hi to those who ID with outness, but there is one woman on my block (whom I know is a dyke) yet she refuses to say hello back and looks away from me when walking by each other.*  
(44 year old student and bartender, New York City)

What is happening here? How can we (i.e., lesbians in general) both ignore and say “hi” to the lesbians passing us on the street? I became increasingly fascinated by the circumstance in which some lesbians claim that other lesbians ignore them but nevertheless detail the interaction rituals of acknowledgment discussed above. Do we ignore each other? Or do we engage, however subtly? Which is the real situation? Several participants dealt directly with this apparent contradiction, although they explained it only vaguely, perhaps because they do not fully understand it, as I did not before I began analysis of the research data.

*Eye contact is a funny thing. Sometimes I've had people avoid my glance, other times met it and engaged. It depends on the person and the situation.*  
(30 year old pilot and record store clerk, Vancouver)

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<sup>34</sup>It is worth noting that I had stopped this particular participant on the street and engaged with her and her friend quite extensively on the issues that the survey raised. After engaging in a “kinship claim” by giving her a cigarette, she was more than happy to engage in prolonged discussion about the issues the survey raised. Apparently excitement, rather than fear, was the guiding emotion in this particular encounter.

This remark sparked my investigation into the possibility that lesbian acknowledgment rituals may be situationally specific. That is, the way they are played out depends on factors such as personality, outness level, spatial dynamics, race and class.

It seems that the “fear/excitement” dualism is useful after all. In certain circumstances, or for certain lesbians, fear is a very real concern. At these times we might see “*ignoring and withdrawing.*” At other times, excitement is the guiding impulse and at these times we “*meet and engage.*” Sometimes we might even find a situation where both engagement and withdrawal occur in the same encounter. Consider the following comment from a white lesbian living in a black neighbourhood in New York City.

*I sometimes tag dykes in Harlem based mostly on dykey or butch clues: short hair, masculine clothes, a tough manner. I have also seen lots of professional, white-collar lesbians. Sometimes they will give me a “look” of recognition but it is not always a friendly look. More often it’s a look of dyke recognition mixed with a bit of “but don’t even try to approach me with your dyke self”. I’m never sure if that’s because they aren’t out or if it’s because I’m white. Maybe both but I have yet to have any women on the street tag me with a friendly wink or smile in my neighbourhood. Sometimes gay men will wink or smile at me but not the women.*  
(36 year old personal manager, New York City)

This situation offers an explanation for a form of studied non-acknowledgment that the participant suspects relates to racial and spatial issues. It is quite likely (and should be a subject of further research) that in Harlem black lesbians acknowledge each other but not white lesbians. Situations of co-presence do not seem to offer a threat in Harlem as she knows she engages in co-present ritual recognition with other lesbians. However, due to the racial (or spatial) factor there is little room for the co-presence to become reciprocal awareness. Interestingly, the same participant mentioned that black lesbians do engage with her on more ethnically mixed streets in New York City. This raises the point that engagement may be a privilege of safety or may be based on other

identity factors (e.g., race) suggesting a need to examine additional factors such as who gets acknowledged, by whom, and where these acknowledgments take place.

Outness levels and safety factors must also be taken into consideration. Several participants mention that they do not feel comfortable acknowledging other lesbians in public where they feel vulnerable to exposure.

*My reactions definitely vary! Feminist bookstore browsing—completely wonderfully acceptable to share a smile that knows and connects with others. If I'm with my family (I'm out to some, but not all members) or conservative students/colleagues/friends I don't want to be recognized or be \*caught\* recognizing others, especially if we are in a conservative environment or workplace.*

(26 year old student and student affairs administrator, Mankato, Minnesota)

In that some lesbians do not feel comfortable being “*caught recognizing*” other gay people, avoiding eye contact (e.g., staring straight ahead) might be a form of “studied non-observance” (Goffman, 1967).<sup>35</sup> This studied non-observance is not oblivion. It is not the same as a situation in which we do not see someone in a public place because we are too busy or over stimulated or do not care. Rather, it is an acknowledgment of sorts (an expression given off perhaps) that takes the form of resolute “non-acknowledgment”. That is, the action follows from a ritual reading but there is no effort to mutually validate following the reading or even show that a reading has taken place. This non-responsive and determined effort not to engage in ritual acknowledgement is readable, although confusing. Consider this statement from the same participant who knows that her response to lesbians is based on situational factors (e.g., comfort in the bookstore but not with her family).

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<sup>35</sup> I am altering Goffman's use of this term slightly. Goffman talks about “studied non-observance” in encounters as a situation where people do not show any outward sign that they have engaged in an act from which they will lose face. I think the term can be applied to the situation where lesbians pretend they have not noticed another lesbian so that they will not have to engage with her and risk unwanted exposure.

*There are times when I encounter a woman I assume to be a lesbian, but I don't get a return on the knowing glance. Could be a lot of things, but mostly I interpret a bit of fear or fatigue of recognition. However, I think the standard lesbian reaction to gaydar (assuming socially appropriate recognition) is one of comfort, connection and pride.*

(26 year old student and student affairs administrator, Mankato, Minnesota)

While the “*standard lesbian reaction to gaydar*” might be “*connection,*” we cannot discount the obvious power of situational factors in guiding these standard responses. These situational factors will be discussed in the section under outness. For now, it is important to note that a form of studious non-acknowledgment may actually be a subtle cue of sorts. In that a heterosexual woman has little to fear from a lesbian and is not likely to have even placed her identity as lesbian (unless it is very blatant or the woman is wise), lesbians will often read the ignoring and withdrawing as a cue of lesbian identity.

Social actors feel compelled to define situations the same ways that strangers they encounter do (Goffman, 1959). This compulsion may explain why lesbians who might not want to engage in mutual identity validation do so anyway when they find recognition strategies directed towards them. It may also explain their avoidance of eye contact if they suspect they will be compelled to engage in mutual recognition. Once they have looked, the pressure to define the situation similarly will be too intense to ignore: They will already have revealed in a glance what they do not wish to reveal. Thus lesbians sometimes evade eye contact as an avoidance strategy. Avoidance processes are the surest way to evade contacts perceived as threatening (Goffman, 1967).

The interactionist concept of altercating applies well to this situation. Drawing on Goffman, Weinstein and Deutschberger (1963: 392) argue that all interaction is goal directed and thus the Ego tries to influence the actions of the Alter in social encounters.

In Goffman's analysis, the focus of the problem of influencing Alter's definition of the situation is Ego's presentation of himself. If Ego successfully presents the correct identity, Alter, in his responsive lines of action, will be obligated to deal with Ego as persons with such an identity have a right to expect.

The Ego (a lesbian casting a prolonged glance) places the Alter (the woman she has tagged) into a role obligation. That role obligation defines the situation as one in which the return of an acknowledging glance is expected. The only way to avoid being altercasted (i.e., expected to give a return glance) is by blatant breaching of stranger propriety (being rude) or pretending not to witness the altercasting strategy directed by the ego. As Simmel's work on visual interaction suggests, people are unconsciously aware of the power of the eyes in revealing not only the attitude of another, but also the characteristics of her inner life.

By the glance which reveals the other, one discloses himself. By the same act in which the observer seeks to know the observed, he surrenders himself to be understood by the observer. The eye cannot take unless at the same time it gives. The eye of a person discloses his own soul when he seeks to uncover that of another. What occurs in this direct mutual glance represents the most perfect reciprocity in the entire field of human relationships. (Simmel, 1970: 302)

In that most people feel morally obligated to observe norms (e.g., being polite to strangers) it is no surprise that lesbians might choose to ignore other lesbians in some circumstances to avoid revealing their sexual identity. In most cases the situation of being ignored is left as it is, although it may be puzzling and lead the Ego to try to make sense of the reason the Alter ignored her. However, such a situation is very different from the situation of gaydar overlooks, in which a lesbian identity has not been read at all. The situation of studied non-observance has been discussed as a ritual because it

commonly occurs between lesbians and is used in guiding further interaction. Unlike rituals of acknowledgment such as eye contact and smiling, it has the effect of halting any further interactional engagement. I turn now to an examination of situations of social responsiveness created by the enactment of rituals of acknowledgment.

#### **4. Spontaneous Expression: Encounters**

Carol Brooks Gardner's (1994) research found that, as well as increased vulnerability in public places, gay men experience situations of heightened civility. There has been no research on lesbians in public places that makes more than passing reference to encounters between lesbian strangers. However, in everyday life lesbians often share stories of connections they have made with lesbian strangers. This study asked lesbians to illustrate in detail instances in which they connected with strangers based on the assumption of shared marginalized sexual identity. The fact that most of the participants relayed an encounter story from the very recent past (last few days), illustrates the fact that these encounters occur on a regular basis but almost at the level of pre-discursive consciousness. As one participant said: "*I am not sure I could have answered this question so easily until last night*" (51 year old social worker, New Windsor, New York). Asking lesbians to think about these things brings them into the level of discursive consciousness, but this reflection is not an easy process.

All the norms that govern social interaction in public places, of course, apply to lesbians in the same way they do to the general population. The acknowledgement of a shared stigmatized identity, however, can serve as an invitation to breach normal

routines that guide stranger interaction. Interaction rituals of both recognition (gaydar cues) and acknowledgment (most notably prolonged eye contact) can instigate interactional episodes of longer duration and a more spontaneous character. These episodes are made possible by the concepts I have discussed (or are, in some cases, constrained by them). In turn, these often minute episodes collectively and over time create the dynamics of the larger lesbian community.

It is relevant that many of the encounters between lesbians described in the surveys occurred in public spaces predominated by heterosexuals. These are the episodes that stand out. Only one survey respondent told of a stranger encounter in a lesbian bar; the rest occurred in heterosexual spaces. Several made the point that in places where lesbians do not predominate, encounters between lesbians have heightened significance. Perhaps for this reason they are more likely to be remembered. Since lesbians in public spaces represent a "situationally disadvantaged group" (Gardner, 1994), situations of heightened civility serve to "homosexualize" public spaces creating a safer environment.<sup>36</sup>

An encounter between strangers in the public realm can last from a few seconds to several hours. Goffman's writing details these encounters among the general population and illustrates how these encounters are guided by norms and a collective impulse to define the situation. Subsequent action is based on the definition of the situation arrived at by both parties in a social situation. When lesbians encounter each other in public places a mutual defining of the situation also takes place. However, the norms are altered slightly because they are based on the lesbian subculture's interaction

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<sup>36</sup> Gardner refers to the "homosexualization" of public spaces by gay men. We could say that lesbians work to "lesbianize" public spaces in order to both celebrate identity and decrease feelings of alienation.

norms. The micro-analysis of these encounters that the study offers, reveals that although encounters between lesbians are guided by norms, there is a "processual" (Brissett and Edgley, 1990) element to them that makes them far from predictable.

Most encounters described in the study were brief, lasting several minutes. Some encounters were longer or led to more lasting contacts. I have developed a typology of encounters. The typology is based on the degree to which the encounter breaches civil inattention norms: 1) interaction rituals (already described), 2) kinship claims (e.g., public aid or brief conversations), 3) blatant breaches, 4) encounters of longer duration, and 5) lasting contacts. Non-connection episodes, although they represent "missed encounters," will also be described because they provide as much insight into the situations of lesbians in the public realm as social engagements do. I will describe these five types of encounters by providing scenarios from the participants' public realm experiences.

The interaction rituals outlined above describe brief moments of focussed interaction between strangers. Three factors suggest that acknowledgement strategies are indeed encounters, even if they are somewhat routine. The first is that they tend to elicit emotions (e.g., feelings of pride). Most routine stranger interaction does not conjure up this level of intensity of response. Second, it is not always easy to predict how these strategies will be received. Due to the presence of many variables (e.g., outness level, situational safety) they are relatively unpredictable and thus involve more risk than the rituals governing most stranger interaction. And third, because they are outside the general public realm routines, they are more likely to lead to more meaningful interactions. Once engaged, interaction rituals can provide openers to

longer encounters. These ritualistic actions, therefore, are important as building blocks to more enduring social interactional strategies.

A kinship claim is the "basis by which strangers can breach silence and ratify talk with each other by pointing out a shared trait" (Gardner, 1994: 96). Kinship claims are verbal or non-verbal calls for affiliation between strangers. Technically, all of the rituals and encounters described in the study, from eye contact to making friendships, are based on the concept of a kinship claim. Lesbians who call forth interaction from other lesbians based on sexual identity are making claims based on their shared insider status as outsiders in heterosexual culture. The eye contact, smiling, and brief words that I have named interaction rituals would not occur if a kinship claim did not take place. For the purposes of my study, however, a kinship claim will contain a slightly altered, more restricted meaning. I assume that interaction rituals represent a form of lesbian reciprocal attentiveness. A kinship claim will be any more socially responsive action beyond reciprocal attentiveness. If the encounter involves blatant breaching of norms, or is longer or more intense, it moves beyond a kinship claim.

All interaction between strangers beyond civil inattention involves risk (Lofland, 1990). Making a kinship claim involves the risk of rejection of that claim by the person at whom it is directed. In a heterosexist society, in which lesbian identity is always potentially "discreditable" (Goffman, 1963), the risk of having a kinship claim rejected (i.e., ignored) is always present due to fear of stigmatization. For this reason, lesbian kinship claims are often strategically subtle. The subtler they are the less risk of embarrassment over rejection exists. As subtle kinship claims unfold and a shared definition of the situation is ratified, interaction within encounters may become less

subtle. However, kinship claims usually start out very subtly, almost slyly. In the case of interaction rituals, they often end as subtly as they begin.

*My girlfriend and I were riding the subway home, and it was fairly late. A very interesting couple sat across from us holding hands. The younger of the two was an androgynous, butchy dyke, and her girlfriend was much older and clearly femme. My girlfriend was holding my hand and we all very subtly, casually glanced at each other. The androgynous dyke seemed very shy, but her presence was strong. Her girlfriend sat ahem! "properly" at her side, seeming to be very ladylike. I had assumed their "roles" with each other from the first glance, and my assumption was quite validated when our stop came up. They were getting off the subway at the same stop as us, and when the subway doors opened, the butchy dyke stood at the opening HOLDING THE DOOR until her girlfriend, MY girlfriend and MYSELF had safely exited. The funny thing is, we would have made it through the door just fine on our own, I mean we'd definitely done it many times before...BUT, it was simply the beauty, and respect and recognition and pride of the gesture that really struck me. The subway is definitely one of the scariest places to be out, cause you are surrounded by some of the scariest people in New York ya know? It was just so beautiful how this woman WITHOUT words made such a huge statement to me and my girl, by showing concern and recognizing us.*  
(21 year old coffee shop employee, New York City)

Evidently kinship claims follow a logical sequence. After the ritual recognition between the interactants on the subway occurred, the ritual acknowledgment of very subtle and casual glances took place. For the rest of the subway ride the two couples engaged in a form of semi-focussed social interaction. They assessed each other's subcultural identities (i.e., butch and femme) but did not go beyond the interactions that govern situations of co-presence. However, the mutual PDAs created a moment of connection, which was borne out in the subtle kinship claim enacted at the end of the interactional episode. It was so subtle that it is highly unlikely that any other subway riders even noticed that it occurred.

In this encounter, reciprocal attentiveness was established briefly and although it did not move on to full social responsiveness, it conjured up deep emotions. Holding the door was a kinship claim, an act of kindness engaged in to demonstrate solidarity. This action, of course, was not necessary and would be extremely unlikely to occur between heterosexual strangers, who assume that people on the subway know how to

negotiate subway doors. In fact, holding the door might be seen as an odd thing to do in most situations. But, as the participant points out, "*the subway is one of the scariest places to be out in New York.*" The act of holding the door, then, was a gesture filled with meaning. It conveyed a message that as lesbians we must protect each other in the city's "*scary places.*" The subtle kinship claim also served to support the boldness of the act of being visible as lesbians in public. The issue of space is also relevant. Had the couples spotted each other in a safer place where lesbian identity is more normalized, the kinship claim would not likely have taken the form that it did.

It can be assumed from the fact that both couples were holding hands on the subway that the lesbians in the above encounter were, at least somewhat, publicly out.<sup>37</sup>

Their kinship claim, then, was based on mutual validation of their status as out lesbians.

What about lesbians who are not out? Do they connect with other lesbians in public?

The next brief interactional episode took place between a closeted lesbian and a lesbian couple in a very straight space; a family restaurant.

*I was at a lovely restaurant in Philadelphia with my father and sister (I was closeted to both at the time) enjoying a late dinner and drinks. We were dressed and polished, my sister quite uptight due to an over-crowded restaurant, the finesse of the young urban successful atmosphere, and the wait for our table. My father was reserved and quiet and trying to calm my irritable sister as we waited in the bar. After 20-30 minutes of crowded tension we were led to a table and took our seats. After placing our order (and doing a bit of sibling squabble), we all relax and take in our surroundings. I notice a lesbian couple sitting immediately to my left. They are both soft butches—short hair, light make-up, clothing slightly effeminate but not wearing dresses—holding hands across the table, enjoying their evening. I keep glancing, noticing their closeness until our salad comes. Their server brings a small cake with a glowing sparkler stuck on top—I assume they are celebrating an anniversary. After they address each other with endearing terms, one of the women turns to me and locks eye contact. She saw me as lesbian, I just felt it. She squeezed her partner's hand, and nodded in my direction. They raised their glasses in a slight toast and went back to their private dinner, as I blushed and smiled. The exchange probably took 15 seconds, but it made my entire visit to Philadelphia. Neither my father or my sister took notice.*

(26 year old student and student affairs administrator, Mankato, Minnesota)

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<sup>37</sup> Many of the lesbians in the study who were not completely out about their sexual identity said that they rarely engaged in public displays of affection in non-lesbian friendly spaces.

Several points from this passage are significant. In describing this interactional episode as one filled with tension, the writer captures the anxiety lesbians may feel when they find themselves in intensely heterosexual situations. That is, they may be motivated to look for other lesbians to validate their identities in a space that denies lesbian existence and makes them acutely aware of lesbian invisibility. The fact that the participant was closeted in a very straight space meant that the discovery of the lesbian couple was important, perhaps inspiring, to her. A fifteen second non-verbal episode, completely unnoticed by attending heterosexuals, made her "*entire visit to Philadelphia.*"

The scenario also highlights the political motives behind lesbian interaction. The extremely brief action of the toast served to politically validate the lesbian couple's right to celebrate their bond. As she engaged in a co-present situation with the lesbian couple, this participant had been waiting for a chance to show this couple that she was also gay and that she recognized (and respected) their closeness. At least one of the "soft butches" had obviously read the participant's behaviours (the glances over to their table), put them together with any appearance cues and had waited for the right moment to engage in ritual acknowledgement (the locked eye contact) and then spontaneous engagement (the toast).<sup>38</sup> That it all happened in a heterosexual space surrounded by "straight oblivion" made the episode all the more memorable. Again, had this encounter episode taken place at a lesbian-owned restaurant or any place predominated by gay people it is unlikely that the connection would have had the same effect.

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<sup>38</sup> Without appearance cues the glancing behaviour might have been read as "straight-based" curiosity or even homophobic staring (disapproval).

Both episodes of kinship claims described so far are very subtle. Kinship claims can also involve verbal communication and more obvious actions. A number of participants said that they are more likely to put in extra interactional labour to help women they read as lesbian in public places.

*I think I decided in my mind which of the staff at a bookstore I shopped at in Vancouver were lesbians based on which ones were more overtly friendly to me when I was buying or browsing through lesbian themed books. When I worked in retail and lesbians or women I assumed or suspected were lesbians came into the store, I was much more friendly to them than to general customers.*

(22 year old student and legal worker Vancouver)

*I work in a public space, so I frequently meet other women I believe (or know) are lesbians. Usually I am a little more friendly or helpful.*

(30 year old pilot and record store clerk, Vancouver)

Public favours from lesbian strangers were common in the data. As a participant observer, I found that when being served by lesbians, I often received special favours.

*In New York City, the young dykes that work at Starbucks in Soho had my girlfriend and me pegged as lesbians from our first cappuccino. Eventually they started giving us what I call the "community discount" (in this case free coffee). After that I asked them to do the survey. How could I resist!*

(Fieldnotes)

The two workers at the coffee shop I frequented when I was gathering research data had recognized my girlfriend and me as lesbians before we recognized them. (Although, in hindsight, it is clear that they were lesbians; their uniforms and bandannas had hidden some of the apperential cues). We, however, were an obvious lesbian couple and in the straight-dominated space of a coffee shop in a very upscale section of town, the two New Yorkers were inspired by our "out" presence. The second time we went in they remembered exactly how we had had our coffees the day before and were chattier with us than they seemed to be with other customers. On the next visit they rung up "no sale" and gave us free cappuccinos. In this case, the behaviour of the kinship claim

(free coffee and overt friendliness) led to recognition. It is important to consider, then, that kinship claims can be behavioural cues used to instigate recognition. Perhaps kinship claims are all the more critical as cues when other signs are absent. In this case, the kinship claim led to an encounter of longer duration when we engaged in discussions about my research on their smoke breaks outside the coffee shop. I made a number of connections based on their advice and extensive knowledge of the lesbian scene in New York City. None of these events would have happened had we not connected through their claims of kinship based on shared sexual identity.

Many participants who related encounter scenarios that involved public aid made the point that the main reason they helped a stranger was because they perceived her to be a lesbian. Even if they had nothing else in common with strangers, shared lesbian identity was enough to instigate the kinship claim of helping behaviour. Consider the following episode where a younger couple helped out an older couple in an obvious state of distress. In this case, the helping behaviour led to an extended encounter.

*One evening [partner] and I were leaving the art gallery. In front of us were a couple of older women in dark suits, holding hands. So I grabbed [partner's] hand as we passed them—but didn't stop to engage in conversation, or even a nod of recognition. I knew they would see us as we passed. A silent solidarity. As we made preparations to pull out of the now busy parking lot, we watched a crowd of about 10-15 people grow around the lot sign—and I knew those cars had been towed. But there were our sisters standing amongst them. I decided we should offer our assistance. So, I drove over to the crowd, opened the door and asked the two women what was up—then offered to give them a ride. I like to keep in mind that memory! The crowd staring as the two dykes got into someone's car and sped away. Once in the car after some small talk—it was determined that I had met one of them...At the time I had believed that she might be a dyke—but wasn't sure (older lesbians are more tricky for me to I.D. unless they wear more obvious signs). So they were eventually returned to their impounded vehicle—but only after treating us to a snack at their café/bakery. The only reason I stopped was because they were lesbians.*

(30 year old pilot and record store clerk, Vancouver)

It is important to raise an anomalous situation. The data overwhelmingly suggested that lesbians are more helpful to women they perceive as lesbian, but one participant

cautions against this attitude, suggesting that while this may be true there is also the possibility that some lesbians may be more hostile to other lesbians for fear of exposure.

*If someone is mean to me for no reason then I sometimes think THEY are queer and having a hard time with it. Last summer, my girlfriend and I were visiting the tiny town I grew up in and we'd gone out for breakfast. A waitress who looked and acted like a dyke, kept giving us nasty looks and generally treated us like shit. She was nice to the other customers. The rest of the workers were nice to us. There was no way they didn't know we were lovers because we're very affectionate with each other. I think the mean woman is a dyke.*

(36 year old freelance personal manager, New York City)

Most participants held the view that lesbians tend to help other lesbians more readily than they do non-lesbian strangers. However, this participant experienced situation of incivility with another lesbian that she thinks was caused by fear of exposure. Evidently a number of factors come into play. The space, the outness of all members of the encounter, safety factors are a few relevant variables. The participant assumed that the waitress was "*queer and having a hard time with it.*" In the small town space (if she were not out) it might have been the case that the waitress felt threatened by the couple's overt PDAs and wanted to send them a signal not to out her by demonstrating any kinship claims. Lesbians must negotiate two worlds: the gay subculture and the larger, often hostile, heterosexual world. Since the danger of stigmatization is ever present in the heterosexual world, lesbians are often aware of the reasons they are sometimes rejected by lesbians in public places.

Sometimes lesbians need help in specifically lesbian situations. To approach the topic of lesbianism directly, however, can be risky. Addressing the topic indirectly is safer because all parties involved can interact under the pretence of a straight guise, or back out of the encounter with identities still intact if the kinship claim is not returned. Tact is an important interactional phenomenon when strangers meet (Giddens, 1987).

In encounters between lesbians, exercising tact involves careful assessment of cues to determine the safety of revealing potentially stigmatizing identities.

What I term blatant breaches are encounter situations between lesbian strangers that directly address lesbian identity. It is useful to look at these situations to highlight the manner in which lesbian norms subtly structure an encounter. Below I provide two encounter episodes that involve couples looking for help from lesbian strangers.

*My girlfriend and I were trying to find a lesbian bar in NYC. It was about to rain and we had been walking for several blocks not knowing if we were headed in the right direction. It was a quiet night and the street was not very busy in terms of pedestrians. As we turned a corner, we saw two other women headed towards us. The women were not holding hands or being affectionate (in fact we found out later that they had just met that night) but we were able to tell right away that they were lesbians. My girlfriend stopped them and asked them if they knew where the bar was. They laughed and said that they were also trying to find it. We were so sure that they were gay that my girlfriend was confident enough to ask them about the bar.*  
(25 year old special education teacher, New York City)

*In Minneapolis my partner and I walked up to some "sisters" (strangers on the street who had given us subtle "check out" glances). We were only in town for a few days and wanted to find out if there were any lesbian events going on. After a few frustrated minutes of not getting the information we wanted my partner said simply: "Yeah, but we are not interested in family street festivals. Are there any events that lesbians would want to go to?" The encounter deteriorated after the blatant breach of norms of lesbian subtlety. Either we had misread their cues or they were uncomfortable with our rather forthright kinship claim, because we walked away unsure where lesbians in Minneapolis go to be with other lesbians on a Friday night.*  
(Fieldnotes)

The first situation is less of a blatant breach than the second. Norms of propriety between lesbians (tact) suggest that we refer indirectly to lesbian related topics. Everyone in the encounter is aware that lesbian issues are being addressed but they are not discussed directly, until other variables have been assessed. Coming out and using the word "lesbian" too directly or too soon in an encounter between strangers can be problematic and can lead to a deterioration in the encounter.

I was careful to assess risk factors when engaging in a blatant kinship claim by telling strangers about the study. In handing out a flyer that states "Attention Lesbians,"

I had to make sure the breach did not offend people. I did not give out the survey when I felt the situation was too risky. For example, I was careful to make sure the lesbians to whom I gave the survey were isolated from heterosexuals who might be attending to the encounter. Also, I often used an icebreaker such as humour. The humour usually involved making light of the absurdity of the situation. By immediately bringing to light the strangeness of stopping lesbians on the street, I steered the interaction in a direction that defined the situation as one of spontaneity and camaraderie.

Few encounters involving blatant breaches were mentioned in the study. A kinship claim can be made without using words that might endanger the interactants due to unpredictable factors such as outness levels or variations in identity. However, several episodes from the study caused embarrassment due to their breaching character.

Below, one interactant makes a kinship claim that the other finds almost too forward.

*I was at GAP purchasing-anyway, there was what appeared to be a Queer woman working and she was staring so dramatically. So I went up to pay, where she was, and she said, "I'll take this one". Fine. She commented on the work shirt I had picked out saying it would look nice on me, and then proceeded to hand me a bottle of free cologne. I was pretty shy and blurted out thank-you and then left.*

(25 year old graduate student, Toronto)

This scenario suggests that embarrassment might come into play in explaining why some lesbians avoid interaction with lesbian strangers. In groups, the breaching of norms to create an encounter situation may be less risky.<sup>39</sup> The more lesbians there are in a public realm encounter, it seems, the quicker the situation becomes overtly lesbian.

The same respondent tells of another encounter involving a blatant breach. Being with her partner she found it less embarrassing.

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<sup>39</sup>This suggestion was clearly illustrated in the participant observation. I found it much easier to approach lesbians in groups than lesbians alone and I also found it easier to hand out the survey to strange lesbians when I was with my partner.

*We were shopping at a skater shop. A queer looking woman -short dyed crazy hair etc was there. We were looking at a shirt that was positioned pretty high up and she came up and said "oh, can I pull something down for you. AND THEN [girlfriend] SAYS "what like her pants", pointing to me. She exploded with laughter... it was the perfect moment. I think she had perceived us to be queers when we walked in...we ended up hanging out with her after that. (25 year old PhD. student, Toronto)*

While more out lesbians may feel comfortable blatantly stating their sexuality to a stranger, many say that they come out more subtly to lesbian strangers. In the encounter of longer duration examined below, its lesbian nature took time to unfold.

*I was spending the summer of '97 in Paris. Riding the metro one day, a woman next to me asked for directions to the Picasso Museum. After giving her directions and getting off the train at the same station, we chatted a bit and decided to have refreshment before we went our separate ways. She, being a social worker from Africa, and me, a NYC teacher, we had numerous "war stories" to share, and soon we were laughing and sharing like old friends. We each "knew"-something told us, that we were lesbians but neither broached the topic just then. We did make a date to meet that night for dinner though, and after dining, I just happened to suggest we drop into a bar for an after dinner drink...as soon as she realized it was a lesbian bar she squeezed my hand and said "thank you". We connected. The night was spent talking and dancing and a "date" was made for the next week, and each remaining day of her holiday, which was too short. It was strange how we both held back at first, even though being middle aged women, and having weathered many storms, we had nothing to hide. Being in that place gave us the means of connecting, even though we both knew. A comfortable surrounding-a place of our own.*

(51 year old teacher, New York City)

As few appearance cues were available beyond the fact that "something told us" (intangible cues), the women waited for the mention of a lesbian space to make a final reading (password procedure). Even though they "both knew," they did not approach the topic of their lesbian identities directly until one of them finally mentioned the lesbian bar. It was a relief on both of their parts to shed the guise of straightness that had impinged on the interaction. It is tempting to think this encounter describes the experiences of older, conservative or closeted lesbians, but I think it is a scenario that many lesbians will find familiar. Many lesbian strangers find they can be casual and friendly with each other but they do not always come right out and openly discuss the

reasons for their connections. Consider this encounter episode, which occurred in a very straight space (a golf course). The women connected based on silent kinship claims and shared a familiarity based on that kinship claim.

*My g/f and I attended the LPGA (Ladies Professional Golf Assn) tournament one year. We sat down near the 18<sup>th</sup> green next to two wimmin who we were pretty sure were lesbians. Then a couple more wimmin sat down next to us... then a couple more. Within half an hour, there were like 40 wimmin grouped together, watching the tournament. We all just started talking, like we had known each other prior to the tournament. Met some nice women that day. Wimmin who, like us, look for that "common bond."*

(42 year old publishing company representative, Louisville)

Encounters which lead to more lasting contacts take the same sequences as all encounters between lesbians (ritual recognition, followed by ritual acknowledgment, then spontaneous engagement) but move from secondary (e.g., fleeting) to primary (e.g., lasting) relationships. Lesbians often meet lesbian friends in interactional episodes that begin as spontaneous encounters.

*On vacation, I have met lesbians in non-gay places and we "automatically become best friends" for the duration of the vacation, socializing together.*

(44 year old student and bartender New York City)

In the following encounter the cue of PDAs created a strong sense of solidarity between lesbians in a straight space. The feelings of solidarity inspired the participant to create an encounter opening which then led to the creation of a lasting friendship.

*My partner and I were waiting to go on a Hudson River cruise...suddenly I saw two women in a close embrace. It almost stopped me in my tracks, simply because this was my backward little town, not Provincetown Massachusetts. I tried not to stare but my eyes did occasionally stray toward them and I (subtly) pointed them out to my partner. Inwardly I rejoiced when I noticed that no one else around (and there were lots of straight folks) seemed to pay them any mind. Later, I saw them on the same cruise we attended and singled them out to talk to... we gave them our phone number and email. As it happened they had marked us as well and I am happy that they did. I admire their courage. Public affection was something I would have loved to have been able to show my partner years ago. I am sure that whatever glances went in which direction; none of the straight people present had any sense of the dynamics between us and this couple. When we left the boat three hours later we were talking like old friends. While we have many straight friends, we would hardly have met them in quite the same fashion.*

(51 year old social worker, New Windsor, New York)

The function of all types of interaction between lesbians in public spaces is, I believe, related to two interconnected concerns. The first is the development of within-group trust and the second is the creation of lesbian spaces. Encounter situations may appear minute but for many lesbians these encounters take on amplified importance. Correct coding, along with claims-making that follows it, can result in the individual being gifted with some special within-group advantage (Gardner, 1994) that leads to feelings of trust and solidarity.

The second function of these engagements between lesbians will be explored more fully in looking at urban spaces. These seemingly small-scale episodes, I suggest, represent the methods by which lesbians in public places engage in a process of marking territories, not just for the people in the encounter, but also for the entire group. Kinship claims and public encounters between lesbians, then, imbue public spaces with lesbian meaning.

## **Chapter Four: “Outness” and the Influence of Heterosexist Society**

This chapter explores the risks encountered by lesbians in the public realm as they endeavour publicly to maintain a lifestyle unlike that of the majority in heterosexual society. In the past, as a subculture, lesbians were forced to live with a high degree of secrecy. Now, however, there is more openness in the lesbian subculture, as the stigma around being gay has eased somewhat. The issue of “outness,” however, is still fraught with problems. First, I will explore some of the risks lesbians face in public spaces. Next I will explore the concept of “outness” as it relates to lesbians in public places.

### **1. Risk, Trust and Safety**

Assessing which strangers to trust and gauging risk factors is an on-going process in which all social actors engage as they negotiate urban life (Giddens, 1987). Beyond the normal risks associated with strangers and public life, lesbians deal with risks related to facing both blatant and subtle homophobia (Herek and Berrill, 1996). As members of a marginalized and sometimes secretive subculture, lesbians regularly negotiate at least two separate social universes in their everyday lives. Both worlds, the gay one and the heterosexual one, contain a certain amount of risk and danger. This regular negotiation of risk creates a heightened awareness of social interactional dynamics.

*In certain situations I would not be outwardly volunteering of my sexual orientation. I think there is always a consciousness of what is and what is not a safe place to be out.*  
(25 year old graduate student, Toronto)

The terms danger, safety, trust and risk appeared repeatedly in the survey data. One of the lesbians who took my flyer on a New York City sidewalk wrote the following e-mail:

*I'm one of the ladies you gave your flyer to on Sunday and would love to fill out your questionnaire. It IS about time our culture begins to address lesbians in public spaces. If your research helps to create a safer, more tolerant environment for all of us, then the least I can do is answer some questions. Thanks for your efforts on our behalf!*

(32 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

What are the safety issues involved in being a lesbian in public places? I have broken down safety concerns into three types of threats: the threat of physical harm, the threat of non-verbal and verbal harassment, and the threat of extra interactional labour.

Probably the least common risk situation lesbians face involves actual bodily harm. Two direct assaults were mentioned in the study: One participant had rocks thrown at her house and another had been punched in the face by a man who thought she was looking at his girlfriend. A number of respondents, however, knew lesbians who had been physically assaulted due to their obvious lesbian appearance.

*I've had friends get beat up because of their "dykie" appearance, generally by straight men.*

(31 year old graphic designer, Toronto)

The threat of homophobic-based violence may keep many lesbians vigilant in public spaces in the same way that the threat of sexual assault does for women in general (Gardner, 1997). This research suggests that lesbians often tailor their presentation of self and monitor their social actions to account for the potential threat of physical danger.

*Perhaps it's a carryover from living in the South, but since I feel that people ID me as lez anyway the most important thing is that I am not at risk of physical attack. I have left clubs when there is too much of a "boy" ratio just because I didn't feel safe. I have warned my partner off me when I sense an unkind vibe on the street.*

(32 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

*My sexual identity is important to me, but it is not ever imperative that I show that identity at the risk of my own safety. I will not come out as a dyke in an insignificant public place if it runs the risk of jeopardizing my own safety. There are loonies and goons out there who would just as happily run me down BECAUSE I'm a dyke as spit on me.*

(41 year old corporate director, Winnipeg)

The fact that occurrences of physical harm (e.g., being beaten up or spit on) are rare does not appear to reduce the threat. Lesbians who are visible live with the threat of attack at all times. Those that are less visible may have to weigh any potential dangers before making evident a lesbian identity in public places. It is not surprising, then, that many of the customs and traditions that have been built up in the lesbian subculture over the decades address two impulses: one to conceal lesbian identity when danger is present, and the other to display that identity when around other gay people.

The threat of physical harm may be increased for visible lesbians in ethnic or class subcultures that appear more homophobic or have a higher violence rate in general. Several participants from New York City, for example, suggested that in public places Black and Latino men were more likely to direct insults at them about their sexuality. That violence or threat of violence against lesbians varies in different racial subcultures needs to be explored further, preferably by lesbians from within those subcultures. Class background appears to be another relevant variable. Participants suggested that working class lesbians (butches in particular) were more visible as a stereotype and thus at greater risk of assault. Historically, social class has played a large role in public realm harassment. Lesbian authors have noted that 1950s working class lesbians were constantly subjected to physical and sexual attack from law enforcement officers and other men in public places (Nestle, 1987; Feinberg, 1993). Middle and upper class lesbians tended to be more discrete and less likely to be on the streets, and thus in less danger of direct physical harm from strangers.

The threat of non-physical interactional attacks was more commonly cited in the study than the threat of physical attacks. Most of the participants who are recognizable

as lesbian by heterosexuals had experienced some form of public realm harassment, from whispers, pointing, stares and “looks of disbelief” (27 year old Via Rail assistant, Winnipeg) to insults and prolonged harassment such as being followed by a car. Several participants mentioned having sexual innuendos directed at them by strangers who were stimulated (or angered) by their obvious non-heterosexual orientation.

*My partner and I went to the symphony at Lincoln Centre. (It's on the West side of Manhattan and neither of us spends much time there). After the concert she and I decided to walk to dinner, we didn't know where we were going, just looking, enjoying the stroll and happily holding hands. After many blocks of OPEN stares and furtive glances from the neighbourhood locals, a man passed us and mumbled “You can hold my hand any day”. We shared a 7 second delay before starting to laugh.*

(32 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

This passage may reflect a type of “friendly harassment” in that the couple felt secure enough to share a laugh and, as the participant points out, the episode created a moment of enjoyment between the lovers.

*We thought it was funny that a man would say something so stupid and even dream that it might be effective. Since he didn't say which of us could hold his hand we debated over WHOSE hand he was really after. I don't think this stranger meant to give my grll and I a reason to flirt with each other, nor did he mean to give us a topic of dinner conversation.*

(32 year old ticketing manager New York City)

Homophobic remarks from strangers were not usually so well received, but many lesbians in the study had become accustomed to both non-verbal and verbal harassment. For many, especially those who are visible to the heterosexual population, this very subtle form of harassment is part of their everyday lives. However, there is always the potential for less immediately dangerous harassment to lead to threats of bodily harm. This threat must be taken into consideration when lesbians decide whether to respond to these gestures of hostility.

Being stared at, glared at and whispered about are routine experiences for those who either are visibly lesbian or who engage in behavioural displays of lesbianism. In

that stares and glares are merely breaches in civil inattention, they do not warrant much interactional labour beyond the occasional glare back. Participants also claimed, however, that verbal harassments by strangers were common.

*My partner and I have been called nasty names and told that we are "disgusting" by strangers in our neighbourhood.*

(28 year old graduate student and T.A., Toronto)

*I find that often folks in my neighbourhood look at my dykeness as a "white" disease and in fact, one man told me to take my white faggy, sick ass, out of his black neighbourhood. He was the only one who has ever been brave enough to say it out loud.*

(36 year old freelance personal manager, New York City)

Goffman (1967) suggests that people often feel compelled to respond to ritual violations that occur in public places. The social order is maintained by rules around the exchange of deference. Breaching the norms stressing displays of deference for a stranger's self are referred to by Goffman as "ceremonial violations."

Ceremonial violations express the selves of both the offending and offended parties. The absence of remedial rituals following a ceremonial violation implies that the offended party, and all present, find the treatment acceptable. Failure to respond to perceived offences against a self may lead to downgrading of the self and affect the deference that one can claim through the situation. (Lauer and Handel, 1977: 430)

If a lesbian identity is being expressed to the public world and if this identity is called into question by harassment, many lesbians feel morally compelled to respond, especially when attacked verbally with homophobic comments.

*I would experience the world differently if I looked less dykey. I've had men on the street make passing comments like "Fucking bitch dyke" and I always say, "Thanks for noticing". I have only experienced verbal assaults not physical ones.*

(44 year old bartender and student, New York City)

*Sometimes men in my building will make remarks like "Hay Baby" and I'll reply "sorry I don't play for your team" or "I ain't yo' baby."*

(21 year old coffee shop employee, New York City)

Living in a society that contains the potential for stigmatization, lesbians are always open to harassment, for it can occur any time they are visible in a straight space. They must always assess the risks involved in carrying out remedial work. Confronting homophobic strangers involves increased interactional labour. Therefore many lesbians in the study said, for example, that they cease any PDAs when they sense a confrontation could occur, in order to avoid harassment (or the necessity to respond to harassment). Others took the opportunity to turn the situation to their advantage.

*I was walking down the street holding hands with my lover. It was in a Toronto neighbourhood known for being a little tough. A group of teenage boys started following us while taunting. "Hey I think they're lesbians, hey are you lesbians? Are you dykes?" After a couple of minutes we turned around to face them. "Yes, we're dykes," we said. "What about it?" At which point their attitude was totally changed. "That's cool man. Yeah, that's really great. Way to go! Be out, be proud!" They were all smiles and strangely supportive. We walked away laughing.*  
(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

The confrontation involved a situation of "altercasting" (Weinstein and Deutschberger, 1963). The lesbian couple, in responding to the taunting ("Yes we are dykes. What about it?") forced the teenage boys to define the situation differently. Instead of dropping their hands and therefore backing down, they created a situation where they labelled the harassers as fearful. The result was a moment of repaired interaction which allowed them to walk away laughing instead of feeling ashamed.

The following statement contains all three types of harassment potentially faced by lesbians in public spaces.

*When I was in a relationship and my partner and I held hands in public, people would stare. When we first moved to the village where I live, young males threw rocks at our house and yelled derogatory things about lesbians. But most people just assume I am straight and say things like "are you looking to get involved with a man" etc. when I am single.*  
(51 year old social worker, Australia)

While throwing rocks at a house is an obvious act of physical violence and staring is a clear breach of civil inattention, being asked about relationships with men is not often thought of as harassment. Yet the risks of embarrassment and extra expenditure of interactional energy on an encounter are real concerns for lesbians. Many lesbians who look straight must constantly deal with a type of homophobia that stems from what one respondent referred to as "heterosexual solipsism." The questions or comments that accompany this assumption involve a form of harassment however it may be largely unconscious on the part of the harassers in that it is part and parcel of heterosexual socialization.<sup>40</sup> In encounters with strangers, then, lesbians must decide whether to make their identity apparent and risk homophobic responses or conceal their identity and be forced to engage in the interactional labour required in passing for heterosexual.

## **2. Outness**

Outness, as it is used in the study, is based on the notion of coming out. With respect to gay identity, being "out", refers to being open about a lesbian or gay identity. Outness, of course, is a concept that is intimately linked to the larger heterosexual society because coming out is necessary only in the context of a world that stigmatizes gay identity and in which lesbian identity is a minority status. In public spaces, people are assumed to be heterosexual until proven otherwise, through verbal and non-verbal presentation of self. In organizing the discussion, I will explore four interrelated types of outness: individual outness, interactional outness, situational outness, and strategic

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<sup>40</sup>To complicate matters, sometimes being visible as lesbian to heterosexuals can reduce the risk of interactional labour. Being out to heterosexual strangers means that lesbians may avoid dealing with the usual "innocent" questions about marital status, etc. in conversations, assuming the interactant is tactful.

outness. All types of outness affect social interaction in public places, between both lesbian strangers, and between lesbians and heterosexual strangers.

### Individual Outness

The scholarly literature on coming out is often psychologically-based, suggesting that coming out as gay in a heterosexist world involves an internal psychic struggle and often occurs in stages as we come out to ourselves and significant others. Sociologists have tended to discuss coming out in a similar manner, though, consistent with a more social approach, they have focussed on the effects of heterosexual society on gay identity.<sup>41</sup> As a sociological study, this research has focused on displays of outness in public places. Regardless of how out she is to family, friends and co-workers, the way a lesbian chooses to display her sexual identity to the urban public world is highly relevant.

Outness in public does not exist in isolation from the other social arenas; thus, I received information on outness in other social realms. I asked respondents to rate their level of outness in five social spheres (family, work, neighbourhood, general public places and lesbian/gay spaces) and also to rate their outness level generally. Using a scale, which ranged from "never out" to "always out", I was able to get a picture of the level of self-perceived individual outness. While the scale offered background information, it is not a statistically accurate measurement.

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<sup>41</sup> Lemert (1972) has argued that as gay people go through the stages of primary, secondary and tertiary deviance they engage in a process of destigmatization of their sexual identities. In the tertiary deviance phase, the gay person has reversed the negative label society has put on her and has proudly embraced a gay identity. This process occurs as gay people become part of a gay subculture which normalizes their sexual identities.

*I am not really sure I agree with this kind of scale or, for that matter, what "outness" is. Coming "out" presupposes that you are uncovering some authentic truth about your identity—"I AM a lesbian." I am much more complicated than that, my sexuality does not completely define who I am—it certainly does not tell the truth (if there is one) about me. For me, to be "out" really means to be "in." With a label you can be known, all about you can be presumed/defined—you are mainstreamed no matter what because you "adopt" a category that already exists for you. Although I would agree that coming out as something other than heterosexual challenges the notion of the ontological unitary (hetero) sexed subject, I wish there was another way to let people know that you like "girls" rather than it be an "outing" so to speak.*

(37 year old PhD student, Toronto)

In other words, sexual identity is much more fluid and complex than the notion of coming out or outness can possibly capture. The study confirmed this notion in showing that lesbians vary their outness situationally. Lesbians, like all social actors, construct and negotiate multiple identities at different times and places. Goffman referred to this as "situational identity." For example, some lesbians are out to their families or in their neighbourhoods, but put on a straight front at work in order to project a heterosexual image to homophobic co-workers.

In this study most participants saw themselves as "usually out." Most, but certainly not all, were out at least to some family members. If we think of coming out only as the moment of disclosure of a gay identity, then most participants consider themselves out to their families. If being out is perceived as extending beyond the moment of disclosure, however, to complete openness about their experiences around sexual identity, then most of the lesbians in this study are not totally out to their families. Many family members refused to acknowledge the participants' identities and chose "*to pretend and ignore all signs*" (36 year old student and day program worker, Toronto) or knew about it but tried to keep it quiet with what another participant referred to as "*a don't ask, don't tell situation*" (46 year old communications coordinator, Winnipeg).

*I am never asked about my "lifestyle" as my mother puts it. This situation is able to work at this time due to my lack of a girlfriend for the last 2.5 years of any seriousness. When I did live with my ex-girlfriend, she was not invited by my mother to my aunt's house for thanksgiving. I was offended and refused to attend.*

(30 year old special education teacher, New York City)

*I'm totally out but they are not at ease with "harping on it" (Mom's words).*

(24 year old rock singer and songwriter, New York City)

The private realm, it appears, is one of the most problematic social spheres in terms of outness. Considering that the family is supposed to be the most supportive group, many lesbians express disappointment when their families do not support their lifestyle.<sup>42</sup>

Another problematic realm for lesbians was the workplace. Several respondents reported that their workplaces were extremely homophobic and others felt that people at work simply do not understand lesbian issues. The ones who felt accepted at work often felt that this acceptance was due to their own interactional labour when they came out to co-workers to bring about that tolerance.

*I tend to conceal my lesbian identity at work in conversations that get personal—I stay silent. If asked I would identify myself as lesbian. However, I have faced harassment (violence) in the workplace for being female. I do not offer the information (that I am lesbian) to avoid harassment in the workplace. I am sure it could be worse.*

(46 year old letter carrier and massage therapist, Winnipeg)

*I am always out, but the assumption made by my students is that I am straight. But as a tenured professor who works on gay and lesbian issues 1) I have little to worry about 2) I cannot control what people know about me as information about me precedes me. I want to be visible and I find that for me a bigger problem is hets who would prefer to keep me invisible. E.g. dinner invitations which are quasi-professional where all heterosexual partners are invited but my invitation makes no mention of bringing a partner or date.*

(41 year old professor, Winnipeg)

The last three social realms I asked participants to rate in terms of personal outness represented more public arenas. The public realm offered the most consistency of

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<sup>42</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that several survey participants talked about being totally out only to their "chosen families," networks of other gay people and close supportive friends (Weston, 1991)

response with respect to outness. Factors affecting outness in private and parochial realms are less predictable because people's personal relationships are so varied. Some families are tolerant, others severely homophobic. Some workplaces have many lesbians in them and others seem devoid of lesbians. The public world, however, is the world of strangers. The fact that the dominant relational form in the public realm consists of strangers rather than intimates and acquaintances means that this arena can provide an escape from the pressures of the private world. Lesbians who face hostility in more intimate settings may welcome the degree of anonymity that the public world offers.

Most participants said they did not hide their gay identity from their neighbours (although many said they did not advertise it either). There was a noticeable indifference about neighbours in terms of outness not evident in the family or workplace. In general, participants did not try to conceal affection for their partners in their neighbourhoods and many had rainbow flags in their windows, or gay stickers on their cars. The finding that neighbours are not as problematic in terms of outness is significant. Most of the lesbians in the studies lived in urban areas. In smaller places or suburban areas, this privilege of a degree of anonymity does not exist.

*My neighbours, when living with my ex, we would hold hands, they would see her bringing in flowers. I believe it was known and not a big deal. Also her car had many pride stickers on the bumpers both front and back. She also had a neon sign above her head that flashed "DYKE" ....*

(30 year old special education teacher, New York City)

*I live with my girlfriend and we are out to our neighbours (they probably see more than they want to through the sunroom in the backyard). It took the cashiers at our local Safeway a while to figure it out (one of them asked if we are sisters) but I think most of them finally have.*

(22 year old student and legal worker, Vancouver)

I broke the public realm down into general public places (e.g., parks or sidewalks) and gay/lesbian friendly places (e.g., bars or bookstores). Lesbian public places were the least problematic in terms of outness. All the respondents claimed they could be completely out in these places. For some participants these places were important precisely because they were the only places, besides their private homes, where they could be totally out. I found that the more closeted a lesbian was in other realms the more important it was to have spaces in which to express a lesbian identity.

*I feel most at home surrounded by women and gay men alike. I feel a kinship that no other social group has created for me. The first time I walked down Church Street in Toronto, I knew I belonged there, long before I acknowledged that I was gay—even to myself. I just felt a comfort there. I felt the world was looking at me and knew I was gay—and it was ok, I didn't have to pretend anymore.*

(31 year old graphic designer, Toronto)

In general public places, most lesbians in the study felt they wanted to be totally out but were often held back by the safety issues discussed earlier.

*In public I am cautiously out. Out in a smart and protected way. I would hold a woman's hand in public, perhaps even kiss her, but probably not while a group of men were crossing the street, nor in a dark alley.*

(31 year old graphic designer, Toronto)

Public realm outness was confusing for the participants to rate because it was so intricately tied to issues of recognition. Because the public realm is populated by strangers, participants often felt that their public outness level depended on how strangers read their identities.

*It is hard to give a number on public outness; because my appearance is quite straight and I when am not coupled there aren't a lot of cues. Being coupled provides many opportunities for being out.*

(41 year old professor, Winnipeg)

As an invisible identity, lesbians must tailor their presentation of self in public places if they want to proclaim their lesbian identity by being out in public.

### Interactional Outness

Individual and interactional outness are linked. How out a lesbian is personally seems to affect the way she chooses to interact with strangers perceived as lesbian. The concept of interactional outness is crucial to the present study because it deals with the assessment of identity and the ways in which lesbians engage with each other as out or closeted lesbians in public places. Does a lesbian have to be out personally to connect with other lesbians in public places? The answer seems to be no. Although it may be easier to make connections with lesbians when we are more visible to each other, lesbians of all degrees of visibility and all stages of coming out made connections with each other in public places.

*When I first arrived in Canada I wasn't out. I was on a trip with the university field hockey team who didn't know me at all because I was just starting to play with them and they were asking me all sorts of questions about my home and life in Ireland. They noticed a ring I was wearing (an Irish Claddagh ring) and asked me about it. There are two ways you can wear the ring (the design of which displays a heart and crown) one signals that you are "taken," the other way signals your "availability." I wore my ring with the heart pointing inwards that signals...that I was taken (I did have a girlfriend at the time who was back in Ireland). Anyways, the girls on the team were curious to know all about who the mysterious "he" was. Not wanting to "come out" or lie I began to say "well that's just the way I like to wear the ring." At that precise moment a woman who was on the team who had not been in the immediate conversation turned around in her seat, looked at the ring and looked at me. It was a look that seemed to read in a complete instant what I was not saying and I think I knew at that moment that she knew what I was concealing. I think she might have even smiled in that satisfied way that signalled that she had "pegged me." It was almost as if in the turn of her head and eye contact that there was a simultaneous reading of our "sexualities." Apart from some appearance markers before this moment I had not been thinking of her (I can't speak for her) as a "lesbian." In the so-called and presumed heterosexual space of the team there was a moment of knowing interaction that impelled us to read each other as lesbians, or certainly not straight. In that moment we created a "lesbian" space that was not thought to be there, it was a moment of resisting the assumed heterosexuality of all spaces.*

(37 year old PhD student, Toronto)

For any lesbian who has spent time in the closet or passing for straight this will be a familiar scenario. In very heterosexual spaces (e.g., workplaces or sports teams), closeted lesbians find themselves balancing an avoidance of coming out with an evasion

of the discomfort and dangers of lying. Avoidance behaviour is often a clue for lesbians in placing lesbian identity but is rarely noticed by heterosexuals. That the other lesbian on the team was not out either allowed the two athletes a moment of concealed solidarity. Another participant who is closeted in her workplace finds that interaction between closeted lesbians is sometimes frustrating.

*There have been instances where I have connected with women I think are lesbians in a social situation but neither of us has stated our sexuality. We might connect only so far and then there is a pulling back on their part. I am not sure if they are uncomfortable with me or that perhaps something might be revealed in a straight setting. I think the dancing around just reflects closeted behaviour.*

(46 year old communications coordinator, Winnipeg)

The concept of "dancing around" the issue is one with which many lesbians will be familiar. Careful monitoring of interactional cues and dancing around the issue of lesbianism, however, does not necessarily reflect closeted behaviour; it may also reflect a situation of interactional tact in which each interactant politely refrains from making the other uncomfortable until the outness of the other interactant can be assessed.

*I was in a public place looking for a washroom and I ran into a woman who I assumed worked there. She was clearly a lesbian. She had an androgynous appearance, wore punkish clothes and was standing with her hands in her pockets swaying back in forth in that boyish way that lesbians do. We read each other instantly as lesbian. There was a moment of prolonged eye contact and then we started talking in a familiar and casual way. I would not have asked her where the washroom was if I hadn't wanted to connect. We talked for 20 minutes about everything from health food to housing. It wasn't until she asked the topic of my dissertation that the subject of lesbians came up directly, even though we had both mentioned our "partners" (without personal pronouns). I told her that I was writing on just what was happening between us: how lesbians who are strangers to each other recognize and respond to each other in public spaces. She was fascinated and for the rest of the conversation we eagerly talked about lesbian-related topics.*

(Fieldnotes)

Social norms dictate that strangers keep a certain social distance from each other. Thus lesbians might also be cautious not to appear too eager to talk about personal issues. I think that lesbians often intuitively know the difference between a lesbian who

is uncomfortable with her own identity (i.e., in denial or closeted) and one who is merely assessing the situation (i.e., engaging in tactful interaction).

Participants suggested that closeted lesbians miss out on the sense of solidarity that comes from connecting with lesbian strangers. As we saw with the two field hockey players, this idea may not be entirely true but the belief does guide the way lesbians respond to each other. It is important to distinguish between two types of non-outness. The first is discomfort from perceived vulnerability and the second is a discomfort with identity (i.e., internalized homophobia). When we run into a stranger who is deeply closeted there is much more likely to be a “*look of cold resistance*” (25 year old student and legal researcher, Vancouver) and no further connection made. In a situation where someone is merely cautious, we are more likely to witness subtle connections.

*In my (albeit limited) experience I think this depends on how comfortable each person is with their identity. I find most lesbians seemed to be pleased seeing other lesbians in public (you don't feel freaky and alone)-and so treat each other accordingly. I know a couple of people who are really closeted who just totally shut off or get uptight when another lesbian appears (a good indicator of a closeted lesbian being the woman who tries really hard not to talk to you when you are buying a magazine from her).*

(22 year old student and legal worker, Vancouver)

Perhaps the manner in which I discussed gaydar rituals makes these actions appear automatic. In reality, lesbians learn the codes and actions of the lesbian subculture in the same way all interactional skills are learned; through subcultural socialization. Socialization into the lesbian subculture, then, is a type of secondary socialization that takes place, for the most part, after a lesbian has come out. The research indicated that gaydar is something that is honed through experience. Length of time a lesbian is out influences the effectiveness of gaydar but there is also sometimes an intensely heightened awareness of lesbian social interactional strategies after coming out.

*When I first decided I was a lesbian, I suddenly started seeing lesbians everywhere. I always had quite a number of gay/lesbian friends, but it really did seem to explode once I ID'd as lesbian. Maybe I was looking more for other lesbians, or just more in touch with the signals being passed between people, but I became aware of how many lesbians there were in many areas of my life.*

(22 year old student and legal worker, Vancouver)

Interestingly, it was also suggested that being in the closet can sharpen gaydar. Closeted lesbians often say they are constantly on the look out for lesbians, even if it is to avoid them.<sup>43</sup> Deeply closeted lesbians, on the other hand, may not engage in strategies of acknowledgment to the extent that more out lesbians do. One participant who had been closeted for 29 years says she did not learn the lesbian interaction rituals well during that time period because she was so deeply in the closet that she tended to ignore gay people when she spotted them. She did know how to read gay people (for survival) but she claims she never responded to them during those closeted years.

*Once there was a woman I met professionally who was very attractive to me. I would not have acted on this attraction, but for some reason, I hoped I could signal a level of shared experience perhaps?? I am not sure this was understood. I am not sure if I missed cues that she sent me. Probably. Because I have been in the closet (first) and then, in a relationships for such a long time I have no clue how to interact socially with strange (and unidentified) lesbians.*

(51 year old social worker, New Windsor, New York)

### Situational Outness

Regardless of how out lesbians are individually, most find that, in reality, their outness is necessarily situationally specific. I refer to situational outness to capture the contextual factors that guide outness. To show how situational factors affect outness, I will consider in depth the answers from one participant. I chose to do this because I think that examining one lesbian's experiences will illustrate the connections between

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<sup>43</sup> Goffman (1963), in discussing the notion of "passing" (concealing a stigma), has noted that people who "pass" are themselves acutely aware of passing strategies.

individual and interactional outness. Every participant in the study felt that their outness was tempered by situational factors, although their specific experiences with outness varied. Situational outness guides interactional outness, which is, in turn, affected by individual outness. This participant is only recently out as a lesbian and is in her first relationship with a woman. Her partner is out in most aspects of her life, a fact which influences her own outness level. Regarding public places, this participant feels she is always out when she is with her partner. She qualifies this statement by saying that there are times when she feels uncomfortable in this public outness.

*When I am with my girlfriend in public places we are always out. We hold hands (all the time), kiss, and call each other "honey" or "sweetie", no matter where we are: walking down the street, in restaurants and stores, at the park together. It's not usually conscious—it's just comfortable in our relationship. The only time it becomes conscious is when I realize that someone else is noticing in some way or has been made uncomfortable because they realize we are lesbians. I fight the tendency to drop my girlfriend's hand when walking by teenage boys on the street (about the only time I would do such a thing).*  
(22 year old student and legal worker, Vancouver)

A lesbian couple creates its own shared outness level and comfort with public affection (or other methods of making a couple status apparent). In couples, lesbians create an outness unit. The "with" that they create has the possibility to make visible to the public world a sexual identity that might otherwise go unnoticed. The with also creates a sense of security. This participant, who feels she is always out with her lover, does not feel as open about her sexuality when she is alone.

*I don't think when I am on my own in public I am particularly visible as a lesbian. When I have just met someone and either realize or am told that they are a lesbian (in a situation where that person does not know that I am) I rarely say "me too" or immediately indicate that I am. Usually it is by getting to know someone more personally that I reveal it. I think maybe this is just the stage I am at in dealing with myself as a lesbian—perhaps I haven't integrated my identity as lesbian with my identity as a whole, or as I think other's perceive me.*  
(22 year old student and legal worker, Vancouver)

Also she is much more careful in assessing risk factors before coming out where more personal relationships are involved.

*I am never out at the law firm where I work, partly due to the fact that the woman who got me the job (who also works there and is also a lesbian) has absolutely forbidden me to be out or to out her (she was very freaked out when my girlfriend came into the office to pick me up one day).*

(22 year old student and legal worker, Vancouver)

This participant's outness at work is affected by a respect for her co-worker's wishes not to be outed. She also finds herself to be very careful in coming out in any circumstance of situational inequality (Lofland, 1990) such as in the university setting.

*When it comes to dealing with people in positions of power (school, work) I consider more carefully whether I want them to know. At university I was out to my friends, but not in my classes or to my profs. I decided it would be silly to out myself to them when they could be biased (they are in positions of power over me). I am going to law school next year, and I am struggling with whether I want to be out or not. I have heard many stories (and read several books) about law school being quite conservative still, and a particularly bad place to be out. However, I want to be able to take my girlfriend to social events, and have people over to my house, so I think that I may be willing to face the problems I will encounter by being out at school.*

(22 year old legal worker and student, Vancouver)

Interestingly, the participant is not always comfortable being visibly out in lesbian spaces. She relates this to the fact that she is not yet secure in her lesbian identity and is uncomfortable around large numbers of lesbians.

*The lesbian bar is actually one of the few places I sometimes feel self-conscious being affectionate with my girlfriend. I feel totally comfortable, on the other hand, being affectionate with her in straight bars-she picked me up in a very straight bar the first time we slept together.*

(22-year-old legal worker and student, Vancouver)

This examination of one participant's experiences with outness underscores the multiple variables that come into play for lesbians in considering how out to be about their sexual identity. A small number of participants said they were out in every facet in their lives; the rest found it necessary to alter their outness levels situationally.

### Strategic Outness

Strategic outness addresses the ways that lesbians use displays of identity as a strategy of empowerment. The impetus to be visible to each other as lesbians cannot be extricated from the impetus to resist heterosexism. To start with, being visible to each other builds alliances among lesbians, even when the lesbians engaged in these actions are not conscious of the political statements they are making. Furthermore, being visible to the heterosexuals challenges that population's power and right to public realm dominance. Simply by being visible lesbians challenge the heterosexual world. For this reason it is not surprising that lesbians are motivated to make themselves apparent to other lesbians and this motivation creates a heightened interactional awareness.

*I do think our senses are heightened in a het environment. I think we're looking for something to remind us that we're not alone; that we might have a conversation if we chose and that it might be above the norm. It is like being part of a really cool, secret club. We spot each other. We share an exchange and go on our merry ways knowing that we're valid and just as entitled to the pub/coffee shop/street as the het masses are, even if they think they own the joint.*  
(32 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

Spotting other lesbians and sharing an exchange, then, can be a political strategy as lesbians show heterosexuals that they are "just as entitled to the streets as the het masses." In the discussion that follows I will focus on the ways that lesbian visibility in public places both builds strategic alliances among lesbians and disrupts the heterosexual assumption that pervades the larger society. These small-scale resistances, I believe, have as much potential to alter the social world as large-scale political gay and lesbian movements.

The study suggested a link between individual politics and a commitment to public visibility. There appears to be a folk conception that the most visible lesbians are motivated by a strong commitment to lesbian politics.

*Dykes in political organizations are pretty visible...but I think they are interested in challenging people by presenting an image like "this is how I am. You better get used to it cuz I'm not changing for you."*

(28 year old convenience store assistant, Winnipeg)

*I think that women whose sexual identity does not contain any political over or undertones blend more easily into the background and as a result stand out less obviously as lesbians. The other blatant generalization I might make is that lesbians who are less out—to themselves and to the larger community—tend to be less obviously visible. Not only because they don't hang around the dyke community, but because their sexual and political identities are not in sync.*

(41 year old corporate director, Winnipeg)

Likewise participants often held stereotypical ideas about groups that were viewed as more closeted and non-political. Two groups that were cited in the study as not tending to be visible or out were wealthy or professional lesbians and athletic lesbians.

*I find in the upper classes it is often harder to pinpoint a lesbian, as they are more refined and not quite so "butch-obvious" in their style. They tend to be slightly more on the soft side usually. They are often white collar and not out at work and need to hide their identity more than blue-collar working class lesbians, who tend to be more on the out-butch side.*

(31 year old graphic designer, Toronto)

*I have found that jocks are not that political. Their interests tend to be on sports, not on political or social issues. For some reason I have found many rather socially conservative. And with that, perhaps, comes their closeted character. Sports teams can be little societies on their own. The butchiness of jocks is not the same as the political woman who may be making a statement. I don't find many women in sports want to make a statement. In fact I don't know of many who are "out". Go to bars, yes. But not drawing any attention politically or personally as lesbians.*

(46 year old communications coordinator, Winnipeg)

These statements stress the influence of subcultural norms (including collective outness levels) on members. The apparent non-outness of lesbians in sports, for example, probably has more to do with the dynamics of the athletic subculture than with the personalities of lesbians who play sports. An athletic lesbian might shun extreme butchness because this is the stereotype of female athletes. In our culture, being athletic is associated with being masculine and athletic women have faced harassment for defying gender norms. To avoid stigmatization an athletic lesbian may present herself

subtly as lesbian (to be recognizable by other lesbians) but disguise that identity from homophobic teammates. Visible lesbians can de-legitimize the whole team's claim to straightness and reinforce misguided social stereotypes that all athletic women are gay.

Most respondents felt that outness and visibility are personal choices, but there is also a pervasive belief in the lesbian subculture that non-visible lesbians betray the lesbian cause. This idea has caused some tension among lesbians and, of course, guides the way lesbians respond to each other in public places.

*I really despise lesbians who try to look and act straight. I look like a dyke because it means I am politically active and do not strive for acceptance. I think when women look more het, they identify with het society, not the lez subculture. Do I feel betrayed by straight acting dykes? Do I feel angry with them for not being brave enough to be out? Probably. I feel angry that they feel as if they must "act and look" straight because they want to be accepted by the het world (44 year old student and bartender, New York City)*

A connection between not being out and acceptance of so-called "het standards" is clearly a view adopted by some lesbians. A more moderate view is taken by participants who feel that the choice of invisibility can be isolating.

*I think straight looking women feel more isolated. However, their self-presentation is a choice. I would think that for some of these women it would be quite frustrating for them to take an active position regarding homophobia etc. Politically and sexually I think they must find themselves stifled by the constraints they have put upon themselves. If I was not a visible Jew and was in the company of people making racist and sexist comments, how would I defend my position? So it's a tough place to be. Why would one want to stay closeted? (59 year old real estate agent, Winnipeg)*

Closeted lesbians are sometimes seen as enjoying the comforts of heterosexual privilege if they do not challenge that assumption by being visible. Passing for straight causes some tension, then, for straight looking lesbians who are out. In fact, many lesbians who can pass feel frustrated when strangers assume they are heterosexual.

*I always prefer that people identify me as lesbian—to experience interaction in any other way often finds me feeling as though I am being "accepted" based on an incorrect assumption of heterosexuality. I definitely dislike it when people presume me to be heterosexual. (26-year-old student and legal researcher, Vancouver)*

The following is a series of questions posed by a self-identified femme who feels that lesbians must take responsibility for rejecting their own subcultural stereotypes and recognize the political strength of lesbians from a range of style and identity choices.

*If it requires more work to label yourself is it more of a struggle to connect with the queer community to find basic support and relationships? Does she not feel like a "real" lesbian if she's not a mega-butch? Is her style viewed as a rejection of the lesbian lifestyle, as an attempt to quasi-closet herself? Does it reinforce false and incomplete stereotypes of lesbian identity if the only "recognizable" lesbians are butch dykes?*

(26 year old student and student affairs administrator, Mankato, Minnesota)

Looking straight and passing for straight are entirely different phenomena. Several participants referred to a time when they were less out. They realized, in retrospect, that they had tried to disguise their lesbian identity through a straight front. Once they came out, they felt they no longer needed to conceal their lesbian identity and the front was shed. Since coming out they had symbolically rejected some of their cues that represent a heterosexual presentation of self. Lesbians sometimes choose to look gay so that they can make a statement just by being.

*I attempt to emphasize my sexual identity and being recognized as a lesbian is by choice, absolutely. I do not wish to hide my identity—Nelson Mandela said "...your playing small does not serve the world...we are all meant to shine...as we're liberated by our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others".*

(31 year old graphic designer, Toronto)

It is important to note that being easily physically identifiable as lesbian is not the only way to be out in public places. Lesbians all along the style spectrum (from diesel dykes to lipstick lesbians) expressed an impetus to confront the heterosexual assumption. At least half of the participants felt that they were more femme than butch in appearance. Femmes often find it harder to make a political statement by just being, and thus they often make conscious efforts to out themselves verbally in order to make their lesbian identity clear.

*If I feel physically threatened (and it is rare that I do) I'll try to hide but otherwise I enjoy playing as a dyke in the world and out myself continuously. I often come out to sales people, street vendors, people waiting for buses, or anyone I have a short chat with. Most folks' don't realize how much of everyday conversation incorporates the assumption of being straight and I just can't let those assumptions pass me by.*

(36 year old freelance personal manager, New York City)

Many participants felt morally obliged to challenge heterosexism in public places.

When it comes to confronting homophobic statements, they often feel compelled to override the risks involved in the situation in order to state their political case.

*I never try not to make it apparent. In school, especially in lit. classes, we always read hetero materials and I usually out myself in my interpretations...I try to express my lez ID in church (if I have to go) and any spot that exudes heterosexuality. I want the world to know that we are everywhere. I always out myself when someone seems unsure in relating to me.*

(44 year old student and bartender, New York City)

*Safety concerns are foremost in concealing my sexual identity. If I meet a straight woman I usually hide my identity until we know each other better, and then I am judged on a personal level not prejudice. However, I have outed myself when I felt strongly in a situation. If I ever hear of anyone saying anything negative towards lesbians/gays, I come out. Jokes, put-downs about gay pride, custody cases, human rights complaints—I'm out.*

(46 year old letter carrier and massage therapist, Winnipeg)

Lesbians often engage in educational work towards dispelling homophobia. Sometimes this educating is obvious, as when lesbians who can pass as straight verbally come out in an interactional situation. Sometimes it is more subtle, as in the case where a lesbian couple refuses strangers the comfort of thinking they are sisters.

Being out not only helps lesbians to create in-group solidarity and confront heterosexism; it also has the cumulative effect of sharpening our gaydar sensibilities and thus facilitates connections between diverse lesbians.

*It is very important for me to be seen. Politically I think it's important to not be invisible, to be as out as I can possibly be in all situations. It also allows me to be seen by lesbians I might not recognize on my own. This way I am able to make contact with a wider group who let themselves be known to me because they know I'm safe (one of them).*

(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

Simply by being visible in public, lesbians become subjected to ritual recognition and ritual acknowledgement from a diverse array of other lesbians. If they are alert to the subtle behavioural cues they receive (e.g., prolonged eye contact) in public places, then an understanding of how to read non-stereotypical lesbians is increased.

Being visible negotiating the public realm *as lesbians* contains vast possibilities for overcoming homophobic prejudice. Everyday acts in the public world can give lesbians a sense of power, individually and collectively. The more lesbians are engaged in displays of outness, the stronger the community. Lesbian visibility contributes to the creation of a more diverse and tolerant society. The study suggested that some lesbians are aware of the subversive qualities of engaging as lesbians in the public world.

*Lesbians who are meeting other queers in parks (or just on their own) to walk their dogs might find this a "community" or "act of resistance." Walking down the street knowing that you define yourself as "queer" may be an act of resistance without wearing a sign, etc.*  
(37 year old PhD. student, Toronto)

Several participants said that displays of outness they witness in public places are inspiring personally and politically. These displays guide their actions in public places.

*Sometimes I feel better if I spot other queer people (safety in numbers I suppose). This helps gauge how "out" I can be, especially if being openly affectionate with my partner. It is also important re: the potential to engage in queer subjects, to raise political points where appropriate, to know that others are out there.*  
(40 year old home-based consultant, Ottawa)

Small-scale displays of outness have more transforming power than many people realize. It is not surprising that, as one of the most visible things we do as lesbians, PDAs have political importance for lesbians. PDAs are very out acts in which lesbians from all spectra of style can engage. These small displays elicit recognition and create feelings of solidarity in a sometimes hostile society.

*If someone is walking hand in hand with her friend I assume they are lovers. It is not always the case but it makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside.*  
(30 year old website producer, New York City)

Lesbian PDAS (whether between lovers or friends), it appears, tend to send a political message to the straight world and to other lesbians. It is perhaps for this reason that lesbians who are obviously visible might find that they receive messages of solidarity from other lesbians. I have had both gay men and lesbians approach me on the street when I am walking with a girlfriend, and commend us for not being afraid to display our lover status. One participant from New York City says she always tries to give encouragement to lesbians who are making themselves visible in public.

*I think we are driven by the desire and need to express ourselves politically. If the woman who caught my eye is doing something I agree with politically I will always give her "prompts." I'll say "You go girl," or sign her petition or \* smile \* take her flyer. I try to let other dykes know they are not alone and have been spotted.*  
(32 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

Analysis of the strategies of outness suggests an interesting twist on the assumption that lesbians are more vulnerable than heterosexual women in public places. The discussion has suggested that lesbians must assess safety issues in all encounters. They often are forced to engage in extra interactional labour to deal with the sometimes hostile, sometimes merely uninformed, straight world. Yet to focus only on the negative aspects of this double consciousness is to miss an important part of the picture. My research has suggested an alternative to the view of lesbians as public realm victims. That is, constant public realm vigilance has created in the lesbian subculture a valuable collective perception of interactional dynamics. For example, I was discussing subtle differences between lesbians and heterosexual women in an e-mail correspondence with a lesbian I had met on a street in New York City. She suggested

that announcing (or refusing to disguise) lesbian identity in public places may be an empowering act.

*Lesbians MOVE differently. Especially here in the city. I think there's more of a swagger, a more assertive stance and stride. I think het women walk more, for lack of a better word, quietly. Maybe in a sea of men the het girls are more aware of their womanhood and (presumed) vulnerability. Out dyke chicks KNOW we don't have to be afraid, maybe we sense that some men find us intimidating and quietly enjoy the fact that we're strong and don't have to "fit in."*

(32 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

Walking the streets as visible deviants is a form of resistance and claiming an identity as lesbian in predominantly heterosexual spaces creates a network of political strength for lesbians as a community.

## **Chapter Five: Urban Public Spaces**

Focussing on social interaction, this chapter explores the concept of lesbian spaces. While the issue of gay and lesbian spaces has recently received attention from sociologists and urban geographers, the literature reveals scant attention to the symbolic interactional tactics and strategies involved in lesbian space making.<sup>44</sup> I will organize the discussion around three major areas: urban diversity, lesbian ghettos and the creation of lesbian territories.

### **1. Urban Diversity**

Urbanism and diversity are concepts which were raised repeatedly by participants in discussing both lesbian interaction and lesbian spaces. Although the social interactional processes explored in the study are relevant in all cities, large and small, issues around city size and degree of urbanism did raise some significant points.<sup>45</sup> Three interrelated points relevant to urbanism and diversity are discussed: a) numbers of strangers; b) spatial options; and c) identity diversity.

By definition a city is a place where the proportion of strangers in public places is higher than the proportion of acquaintances and intimates (Lofland, 1973). Logically, the larger the city, the higher the number of strangers who will be encountered in the public realm. The issue of number of strangers was raised in the present study with

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<sup>44</sup>The area of study known as "Queer Theory" has seen an upsurge in writing on the notion of "space." Drawing on postmodernism, whole volumes are dedicated to the study of "queer" spaces in a colourful array of studies (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Ingram et al., 1997).

<sup>45</sup>In this limited study, comprehensive comparative analysis is impossible. I speculate from the data about the differences between smaller and larger cities but I do not attempt to generalize from these speculations.

respect to the visibility of lesbians. Big-city lesbians walking the city streets know that they will see lesbians, even if they do not know any personally. In larger cities, even closeted lesbians will experience the small-scale identity validation that comes from seeing other lesbians in public places. That is, they will see other lesbians, whether or not they choose to respond to them. Not surprisingly, I found that in larger cities there tended to be an assumption that "lesbians are everywhere."

*In my city I feel that no place is off limits to me. Lesbians are everywhere and span all race/gender lines. I'm proud to live here and prouder still to be one of many out voices in my office and neighbourhood. I acknowledge that we have a long way to go on the upper east side, but at least we are trying. The city as a whole is so willing to accept diversity that everyone prospers. YAY NYC!*

(36 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

*In Toronto there is a greater diversity of lesbians than anywhere else that I have lived-there are also a greater number. Here in To...there are a lot of "lesbians". I think there is a little voice inside that goes "yep, there's another one." Maybe I'm spoiled in To, who knows...*

(37 year old PhD. Student, Toronto)

Although the study did not focus on small town lesbians, participants who were living in small towns (or had lived in small towns) lamented the lack of lesbians on the streets. Certainly they noticed a lack of visible lesbians engaged in public displays of affection or other perceptible displays of lesbianism. Recall the comment from one encounter in which a participant describes seeing lesbians engaged in PDAs in a public space in her small town.

*We walked along and suddenly I saw two women in close embrace. It almost stopped me in my tracks, simply because this was my backward little hometown, not Provincetown Massachusetts.*

(51 year old social worker, New Windsor, New York)

This participant was overjoyed to see an occurrence (lesbian PDAs) that was not commonplace in her town. Perhaps a lesbian from a larger city would have taken brief notice of this sight and moved on. In the smallest places, some respondents claimed

that most of the lesbians they saw were known from “the community” and that lesbian strangers were virtually non-existent. This fact raises interesting questions about isolation in small towns. For marginalized people, invisibility begets isolation. In smaller places, networks of friends are one of the few options available for validating lesbian identity. Isolation can make coming out a difficult process in smaller places. Consider the following scenario where a woman from a small town approached two women she read as gay for advice in meeting other lesbians.

*Recently I was shopping at Shopko (discount version of Target) with my girlfriend. We were shopping together but weren't displaying any cues of being in a relationship. A woman came up to us and said she recognized my girlfriend from her job at the (dyke-owned) coffee shop. I wouldn't have pegged this woman to be a dyke normally. She looked like a typical working class, Minnesota woman (long curly hair, jeans), shopping with her daughter. But she asked if she could ask us a question (we sort of knew what was coming). She asked if we knew where we could go in our small town to “meet people.” We all relaxed and we tried to tell her that our small town didn't really have any (safe dyke) bars. We gave her some leads on how to get involved in the community. But we pretty much all came to the conclusion that our town sucks and the only place to go was the cities. We wished her luck and walked away. We felt pretty good that she spotted us (pretty obvious butch femme couple) and had the guts to ask total strangers such a personal question- “outing” us and her.*

(24 year old student and bookstore clerk, Mankato, Minnesota)

Being from a smaller town, this “straight-looking Minnesota woman” did not have the regular opportunity for the type of identity validation that exists between urban lesbian strangers. For her, spotting a lesbian couple in a public place was likely exciting and was, perhaps, one of her few opportunities to discover contacts. Interestingly, the participant notes that the stranger who approached her did not present any cues of lesbian identity. Being isolated from lesbian subcultural socialization, perhaps this woman was not aware of the intricacies of lesbian coding and presentation of self that lesbians in cities take for granted. Another lesbian from the same small town made the following comment, which lends some support to this position.

*I live in a very straight minded community. Perhaps I don't display much of a lesbian identity because I don't think I will run into anyone who will read it.*

(26 year old student and student affairs administrator, Mankato, Minnesota)

This observation raises a very interesting question about impression management. Do lesbians in small towns engage in a lesbian presentation of self to the extent that urban lesbians do? The following humorous story from a small-town Australian lesbian suggests that they might not, at least not to the same extent.

*I don't live in an urban area, I live in a tiny village. I tend to be rather oblique. My ex partner and I lived here for five years before the woman who lived across the road wandered over one night, knocked on the door and said "hi, do you want to come to a women's film night?" We looked a bit confused; she laughed and said "I'm a lesbian." I had just assumed she was straight. Maybe it was the bleached blonde hair, make up and mini skirt or perhaps it was the husband and kids.*

(48 year old social worker, Australia)

Small-town lesbians do not have the luxury of seeing large numbers of lesbian strangers and they often do not have an abundance of subcultural hangouts where they can practice lesbian presentation of self. An urge to see and be seen was discussed by a number of lesbians in explaining why they were drawn to larger urban environments. The urban geography research suggests that the critical mass of gay people are drawn to urban areas (Bell and Valentine, 1995). In fact, many lesbians leave small towns because they have established a heterosexual identity there. In more anonymous urban areas they have more freedom to build a new identity. The homophobia in smaller places and the limited options for expression of sexual identity are often cited as reasons for leaving or avoiding smaller places.

*I feel comfortable being a lesbian almost anywhere. The only time I hesitate is when I'm visiting the tiny town I grew up in. It's harder when you are running into folks who knew you when you were little but have no clue about who you are now. Strangers are easier.*

(36 year old personal manager, New York City)

*I simply don't want to live in suburbia where neighbours might be hostile to my sexual orientation. So I minimize the chance of this by living in a neighbourhood that has a large number of lesbians.*

(41 year old professor, Winnipeg)

While there are clearly benefits to urban living for lesbians, a number of participants say that in cities lesbian communities are more divided than they are in smaller places. Those who had moved to a larger city said that in the smaller places they come from the lesbian/gay communities are much more closely knit.

*I've noticed that gay men and lesbians outside of urban centres gather together and live their lives more interconnected. In big cities the gay community is much more divided. Most of us complain about being ignored but if we were in "West Bone" Arkansas, we'd be best friends.*

(44 year old bartender and student, New York City)

Spatial options are restricted in smaller places, but smaller places force gay people to be closer. In smaller cities, lesbians and gay men from all races and classes tend to hang out in the only gay bar and socialize together. Those who do not like bars are restricted to meeting in private spaces (i.e., homes) or temporary spaces like softball teams. In larger cities there are bars frequented by different races and classes. Options in spaces are tied to options in expressing identity. For example, a Latino lesbian living in a small town will not have the luxury of attending a Latino lesbian bar. One New Yorker discusses her experiences dating a black woman. This interracial relationship heightened her awareness of the divisiveness of the lesbian community in New York City.

*Race played a huge role in how we were treated in the community. Many black dykes hated that she was with a white woman and they told her outright or were rude to her. If we went to a black dyke function, many of the black women would ignore me; one woman purposefully stepped on my foot. There were times when I did not go places with her out of respect to other black women who would be there,,we all deserve spaces where we can leave the issues of our lives behind. It was hard sometimes because we couldn't share all of each other's lives.*

(36 year old freelance personal manager, New York City)

In cities with fewer lesbian spaces, participants often mentioned heterosexually dominated spaces that lesbians frequent as "lesbian spaces" (e.g., Home Depot and feminist gatherings). This suggests that in smaller cities, lesbians often must forge their spaces in heterosexual space. In bigger cities heterosexually dominated spaces were not mentioned, although spaces with progressive atmospheres like vegetarian restaurants and alternative cafés were frequently mentioned as lesbian hangouts. In New York City and Toronto, participants listed many options for lesbian spaces including bookstores, coffee shops, bars and neighbourhoods.

*The Dyke Day Parade is a massive parade the day before the general Pride March that is pretty much grrrls only. This is the most grand scale of our forging a space. It's WONDERFUL! The Dykes on Bikes always attend and all the women from the boroughs come out and come together! The dyke-owned/operated pubs, restaurants and shops (like Toys in Babeland) are equally important to our visibility as a community. I think that we support each other and even search out dyke commerce. I find that lesbians are more likely, when looking through the phone book, to try to CHOOSE a dyke business. There are also areas of the city that are havens for lesbian residence, but I think NYC is exceptional because the lez/gay community is SO ingrained in the culture of this city that we are literally EVERYWHERE!*  
(32 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

In discussing the options for lesbians in Toronto as opposed to Winnipeg, one participant argues that increased spatial options lead to increased identity alternatives.

*In Toronto, there is more "selection" and I meet a very diverse group of lesbians. I definitely prefer this to seeing the same 16 lesbians drinking Melon shooters...every Saturday. Toronto allows for a lot of expansion of what a lesbian can be, do, say, look like etc. I meet tonnes of lesbians here and I find that this changes my experiences a lot because I have an opportunity to meet lesbians that I have more in common with than sexual orientation. I feel that a choice facilitates meaningful interactions based on common interests rather than the obvious cruising for a fuck or a friend.*  
(28 year old PhD. student and T.A., Toronto)

Subcultural spatial negotiation is more likely to take place in large urban areas where there is more diversity. In large cities, there are enough lesbians in the various subcultures to dominate spaces. This situation creates more conflict as different groups struggle for spatial dominance.

*There are power struggles going on and I love it. My favourite is the power struggle of the dyke generation gap. 20 years ago I don't think it ever occurred to anyone that there would ever be a generation gap in our community. I know lots of older dykes who fought for visibility in the 70s who want to have dyke-only spaces like dyke-only bars. But so many younger women find this restrictive and not useful to their lives. They want to be able to go to a space where everyone is welcome.*

(36 year old freelance personal manager, New York City)

*There is a whiteness and middle-class "ness" that pervades the lesbian and gay community and the spaces/places that are identified with that "community" in Toronto. And there is definitely more emphasis on youth and "coolness"; this subculture seems to take up a lot of space in the bars/dances/marches etc., which is sometimes unbearable. However, there are groups and individuals who work hard here to (re) claim spaces/places for a greater diversity of lesbians. With the diversity of people here I think there is a certain balancing that goes on as particular individuals and groups will take up more or less space at different times and in different contexts.*

(37 year old PhD. Student, Toronto)

In larger cities a lesbian can choose to frequent spaces where she feels most comfortable in her personal identity. One Toronto participant who has also spent some time in Winnipeg compared the two cities.

*The community I know best is the one I belong to: white and middle class. I don't know about spaces for women of colour very well. Nor do I know much about the ways of wealthier women. Although I hear the potluck circuit is big. There's a bar in Toronto called Slack Alice which caters to more "professional women." But I didn't really hang out there. In Winnipeg the community seems so small that there simply aren't as many lesbian options. So you see a lot more diversity, in a single establishment.*

(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

While the variable of degree of urbanism influences diversity which, in turn, affects social interaction, it is important to note that the strategies I have outlined occur in all types of settings. In fact, a number of participants from larger cities said they were likelier to feel bonds of solidarity with lesbian strangers in places where lesbians are less numerous.

*At Pride Day I treat lesbians like everybody else—they're all lesbians. In a situation where it would be unusual to meet another lesbian, I'd be more likely to engage her in a conversation if I thought she was interesting/nice.*

(36 year old student and day program worker, Toronto)

*If I am outside To. in a shopping mall for instance or in a small Ontario town then I think my reaction to recognizing other lesbians is different than in To. itself. I probably would be more cheerful about seeing someone who I think is a lesbian in that situation.*  
(37 year old PhD. Student, Toronto)

The interactional experiences of lesbians living in more homogenous places like small towns are an important concern. One participant from New York City suggests that, for big-city lesbians, there exists more of a sense of playfulness around presentation of self.

*Living as a dyke in New York City is so easy for me that I consider all the public spaces here to be dyke spaces and I travel to a lot of out of the way parts of the city. I think that carving out safe public spaces in smaller urban settings and rural settings is more interesting in some ways because those folks have a harder time of it. There are fewer of them. They may also have to be more aware of clothing and behavioural cues than I am out of necessity. I don't have to think about those things in order to survive, I am only aware of them because it is fun.*  
(36 year-old freelance personal manager, New York City)

While opportunities for lesbian stranger engagements increase in urban environments, it is important not to dismiss the efforts of non-urban lesbians who must forge their identities under more restrictive conditions. I turn next to an exploration of the almost exclusively urban spatial phenomenon of lesbian neighbourhoods. While neighbourhoods are more accurately described as parochial spaces (Lofland, 1998), the public spaces within them are pivotal places for lesbians in negotiating identity and community.

## 2. The "Lesbian Ghetto"

Over the last decade, there has been a host of studies on the neighbourhoods gays and lesbians create in cities. In making a case for the crucial role of stranger interaction, I will take a different tack than is usually taken in the literature.<sup>46</sup> I wish to

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<sup>46</sup>Most of the literature explains that, for lesbians, the lure of these neighbourhoods is affordability and the desire to be close to networks of lesbian friends (Rothenberg, 1995; Valentine; 1995).

discuss lesbian ghettos using an analysis of the characteristics of these areas that attract large numbers of lesbians. In doing so, I will delineate some of the processes that have created these areas as distinctly lesbian and compare them with gay male ghettos. Most importantly, I will analyze the characteristics of these spaces with respect to the issue of the creation of non-intimate lesbian solidarity.

In the late 1970s several studies (Levine, 1979; Murray, 1979) used mapping techniques to show that the territories gay men create demonstrate all the qualities of an ethnic ghetto as outlined by Park and Wirth (i.e., institutional concentration, cultural area, social isolation and residential concentration). In one of the first studies that made reference to lesbians, Manuel Castells (1983) argued that the predominance of gay men over lesbians in the creation of distinctly homosexual urban neighbourhoods reflects a profound gender difference. Using the city of San Francisco as his model, he argued that the reason there was no lesbian territory there comparable to the well-known Castro district, was that women were less territorial than men.

Men have sought to dominate and one expression of this domination has been spatial...Women rarely have these territorial aspirations: their world attaches more importance to relationships and their networks are ones of solidarity and affection...when gay men try to liberate themselves from cultural and sexual oppression, they need physical space from which to strike out. Lesbians, on the other hand, tend to create their own rich, inner world, and political relationships with higher societal levels. They are thus "placeless" and much more radical in their struggle. (1983: 140)

Social geographers have criticized Castells' theory. Adler and Brenner (1992) argue that lesbians do congregate spatially in certain neighbourhoods but because lesbians are less secure financially and are more likely to have children, they choose different neighbourhoods from gay men who focus more on economic power, visibility and night

life. Deborah Wolfe's research in the 1970s showed convincingly that lesbians have created territories in cities like San Francisco.

Women do tend to live in certain ethnically mixed, older, working-class areas of the city: Bernal Heights, the Mission District, the Castro area and Haight-Ashbury. These areas bound each other and have in common a quality of neighbourhood life, low rental housing and the possibility of maintaining a kind of anonymity. (Wolfe, 1979: 98)

Studies of these lesbian neighbourhoods have revealed the unique ways that lesbians create spaces in cities (Valentine, 1995; Bouthillette, 1997; Rothenberg, 1995; Lo and Healy, 2000). The consensus is that although lesbians may be less visible on the urban landscape than gay men, they are found in significant numbers in predictable areas of many cities. As well, the lesbian presence in the neighbourhood affects these areas in unique ways.<sup>47</sup>

I asked participants whether there were any areas in their city resembling a lesbian neighbourhood. In all the major cities discussed by participants (and these include more than the studied cities since many participants have lived in and visited other cities), I found that there are areas that could be loosely termed lesbian neighbourhoods. Many of these areas have nicknames such as "Dyke Slope," "Dyke Heights," or the "Fruit Belt," but are known as lesbian areas only by lesbians and others in the know. This limited knowledge of their lesbian character means that they cannot accurately be defined as ghettos in any real sense of the term. Nevertheless most cities have areas that have a higher than usual proportion of lesbians living in them. The larger the city,

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<sup>47</sup>Unlike ethnic populations, it is hard to determine where lesbians live by mapping techniques or by using census data. Following Rothenberg and her study of Park Slope, Brooklyn, I will assume that if lesbians say that lesbians populate certain areas then we must take their word for it.

the more of these lesbian areas exist. In New York City, one participant named six areas that have large lesbian populations.

*This is NYC—there are so many dyke spaces. There are whole neighbourhoods...that have large dyke populations: Park Slope, The East Village, the Lower East Side, Forte Green, Clinton Hill, Harlem. These are all urban areas. The first three listed are white, the last three are African American. In all these places lesbians have been, or are, a big part of the gentrification process that is taking place. Lesbians have helped set up and supported little cafes, funky shops and art space. I think lesbians are drawn to the places that are cheap. From there they start adding the spaces that are important to them, comfy, funky, cheap, fun spaces.*  
(36 year old freelance personal manager, New York City)

Toronto, the largest Canadian city in the survey, has fewer lesbian enclaves than New York City but there are several areas that draw a large number of lesbians.

*In Toronto there are several lesbian neighbourhoods. The College/Grace area (known as Little Italy) is very dykey, as are some of the local restaurants. The Dip (Café Diplomatico) and Bar Italia are frequented by community lesbians, Lots of dykes hang out in Church street which is primarily the gay male neighbourhood, Also the East End, near the Danforth is full of lesbians, The arts dykes tend to live in the Parkdale neighbourhood.*  
(37 year old radio technician and producer, Toronto)

In the smaller cities, participants described one or two neighbourhoods in which lesbians congregate. Three such areas are described below.

*I would say the area in which I live, the Wolseley Area, has attracted lesbians to rent and buy homes. In fact it has been nicknamed "Dyke Heights" for some time. It is hard to walk in this area without bumping into a lesbian. That helps create a sense of community, comfort or unity.*  
(47 year old communications coordinator, Winnipeg)

*There is a neighbourhood in Louisville called The Highlands. It attracts a wide variety of very diverse people, mostly liberal minded. There is also a large lesbian population in the Highlands. I think a lot of lesbians are attracted to a more liberal, open minded approach to life.*  
(42 year old publishing representative)

*In Vancouver, the East Side around Commercial Drive is a "lesbian ghetto." Commercial is urban and generally home to immigrants, lower income people etc. It is pretty racially diverse in addition to being gay-friendly. It used to be Italian-dominated but isn't anymore but there are still Italian run markets and restaurants. There are co-ops, health food stores, coffee shops, funky furniture/art stores, organic bakeries. Womyn's Ware is on Commercial-very lesbian friendly of course. There are always lots of lesbians out on the streets (e.g., walking their babies)*  
(22 year old student and legal worker, Vancouver)

What do these lesbian neighbourhoods have in common? Analysis of these areas suggests a number of interrelated features common to lesbian neighbourhoods, no matter in which city they are located. The first is that they begin in a “zone of transition”, offering relative affordability. The second is that they are economically and culturally diverse. The third is that certain types of commerce are available. The fourth is the fact that they tend to be urban and offer a degree of anonymity. The fifth is that the street life offers the possibility of seeing and being seen by other lesbians.

In discussing patterns of urban placement, Ernest Burgess (1925) introduced the notion of “zones of transition” which are areas of the city that are run down and in the process of change. As “urban pioneers” gay men and lesbians move into these “discard zones” and change the character of the area in the process.

The apparent role which gays are playing in neighbourhood gentrification suggests that they may be more willing than straights to live in urban transitional areas...In this regard, gays might be viewed as urban pioneers who sometimes generate conflict as they displace poorer ethnic groups. (Weightman, 1981: 109)

One main reason that gay people are drawn to rundown inner city areas is because they tend to seek social environments where they will not be conspicuous (Bouthillette, 1997). Because gay men are more often single and less susceptible to gender-related harassment, they tend to gentrify these zones of transition in inner city areas such as warehouse districts. Lesbians are more likely to move into zones of transition that are safer and closer to schools and other family related facilities. In describing the difference between a gay ghetto and a lesbian enclave, Bouthillette describes the different “gender-related” processes at work in two Vancouver neighbourhoods. She argues that,

the historical gay male sexual marketplaces have tended to form the kernel of gay male ghettoization and territorialization. However, lesbian feminist politics, an early cultural signifier, have oriented lesbians more towards counter-cultural enclaves. (1997: 213)

Lesbian neighbourhoods, like gay male ghettos, also begin in an unpopular place (a discard zone) but these areas rarely become trendy, economically upscale and visibly gay.<sup>48</sup> Gay men are more likely to displace people as they move into and upgrade an area. As "marginal gentrifiers" (Rose, 1984), lesbians move into an area that is populated by other marginal groups and become part of the general counter-cultural scene.

*Although there may be any number of "gay ghettos" in a large urban centre, lesbians, I believe, will always be over-represented in lower income areas, or areas of the city with lower property values. In every major city I have visited, the lower-income end of town has been home to at least one women's ghetto or community.*  
(26 year old student and legal researcher, Vancouver)

The differences between urban spaces created by gay men and those created by lesbians are interesting with respect to the types of commerce available and hence the atmosphere created. Gay areas are more trendy, upscale and based on consumer culture.

*In New York, gay men are very much perceived to be GLAMOROUS! And FABULOUS! Spaces created for gay men cater to this idea. Most gay men spaces are pretentious and uhhhh...glittery! I just feel lesbian SPACES are more DOWN TO EARTH!*  
(21 year old coffee shop employee, New York City)

Areas housing large numbers of lesbians are more likely to contain commerce reflecting a counter-cultural atmosphere rather than a trendy consumer-based culture.

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<sup>48</sup>Gay male ghettos exist in many major Western cities. In the largest cities (i.e., New York, London and San Francisco) these areas may exist in the cognitive maps of many urbanities but in most cities these enclaves are unknown to the general population. This unawareness is greater with lesbian enclaves which are never as visibly gay as gay ghettos and are usually known as lesbian areas only by other gay people.

For example, lesbian areas often house alternative cafes, used bookstores and food co-ops.

*In Vancouver, there is definitely a difference between the "gay male" areas around English Bay, Denman Street and Davie and the "lesbian" areas (Commercial Drive). English Bay is more upscale, more coffee-shoppo and the gay male bars are more clubby. Commercial was always more funky and alternative-very diverse in several ways (economically, racially) and the only supposed "lesbian bar" is more laid back.*  
(22 year old student and legal worker, Vancouver)

A New Yorker, describing the type of neighbourhood that attracts lesbians, listed the following types of commerce found in lesbian ghettos:

*Bookstores, pet stores, food co-ops (organic of course!), a running path, bicycle path, 8 bars in a one mile radius, a kayaking school, a coffee shop or 3! A yoga centre...uhh, OK so I am being a bit stereotypical but hey! Us dykes are a kind of their own.*  
(22 year old coffee shop employee, New York City)

Although humorous, this passage suggests that there are identifiable qualities of the areas to which lesbians are drawn. The statement: "*Us dykes are a kind of their own,*" points perceptively to the reality construction behind territorialization.

Lesbian neighbourhoods are more toned down in terms of overt gayness. Lesbian enclaves are urban and diverse but do not become visibly gay the way male gay ghettos do. A New Yorker compared the lesbian ghetto with the gay male ghetto:

*Some nights in the Village, you have to look far and wide to find someone who isn't a gay man. Not so in Dyke Slope for lesbians.*  
(30 year old website producer, New York City)

Participants felt that lesbians were less visible on the landscape due to concern for their safety and the fact that they are more likely to be raising children. Also there is a general subcultural ethos in the gay male culture which focuses on casual and public sex and the party attitude that accompanies that scene. For example, Lo and Healy (2000) argue that lesbians who live in the gay-male dominated West End of Vancouver have a more visible presence on the streets than the lesbians who live in the lesbian-dominated

East End. In the East End, they argue, lesbians are a more subtle influence on the environment. In the West End lesbians tend to follow their gay brothers and are more likely to flagrantly flaunt their sexuality.

*In New York's Chelsea area (which is a hot spot for gay men), there are places to "see and be seen." It is more fast paced and people are generally well-dressed. There are many, many dance clubs and bars. I feel like the lesbian areas are more laid back/relaxed. You don't feel like you have to get dressed up to go places, etc. I would say that the lesbian neighbourhoods tend to be quieter. In Atlanta, many lesbians think that the areas of gay men tend to be pretentious, with everyone trying to compete for who has decorated their apt/house the nicest, who has a car they cannot afford.*

(26 year old research assistant, New York City)

Because their neighbourhoods are less conspicuous, many lesbians find it inspiring to visit, shop in or party in gay male areas. Simply to walk the streets in a visibly gay area is often a source of power and perhaps for this reason the streets and commerce in gay male ghettos often contain lesbians who come to engage with other gay people. Lesbian areas do not contain the stimulating nightlife of gay ghettos and may not even be able to support a gay bar or gay-friendly coffee shop. Thus lesbians often hang around in gay areas to see and be seen. One New Yorker made the following comment about the gay male areas in downtown Manhattan.

*We go downtown on a pretty regular basis and it's always fun! Almost like going to a party. The boys and grrls are so polite there, if not charming and playful. I think that is why the neighbourhood is so desirable to people moving into the city. In many ways, it is the kind of solidarity that has been so widely publicized and romanticized by the media and pop culture. Unfortunately, only the gay boys can afford to live down there since the rents are so high.*

(32 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

However, just as often lesbians express disappointment because the gay ghetto in their city is so male dominated.

*Last night I walked through the gay ghetto looking for signs of hope (a.k.a., more cute girls, boy/girls) and I saw only men. This is my community? Where do I fit in with a bunch of gay men when I am looking for love?*

(28 year old PhD. Student and T.A., Toronto)

Lesbian neighbourhoods were often established during the lesbian-feminist days (i.e., in the 1970s) and have an aura of political correctness that is now being eschewed by some younger lesbians who would prefer their neighbourhoods to mimic the blatant sexuality and party atmosphere of gay ghettos.

*At one time, I think most of us would have said that gay men use public spaces to find and have sex and that dykes used their spaces for meeting, talking, feeling safe, learning etc. But I think our community (a generalization here) has started to publicly explore our sexual side as well. Dyke spaces of all kinds are now a lot like the boys spaces: we're often on the look out for new sexual experiences.*

(36 year old freelance personal manager, New York City)

While many lesbians use gay male spaces to enhance their chances to interact in a visibly gay space, there are also power struggles over space that exist in the gay community.

*I'd say the "power struggle" is most prominent between lesbians and gay men. When one says "GAY BAR," you would assume that ALL OF US are welcome. Most of the time, the bar caters to a "gay men clientele" and leaves us dykes feeling COMFORTABLE, but not always WELCOME.*

(21 year old coffee shop employee, New York City)

*There don't really seem to be power struggles over space in my community. Boys have their bars, we have ours, and we share the spaces in between. Now Orlando, that was a different story. The "boys" bars outnumbered the grrls spaces 3:1. One summer a new lovely club opened. It had great music and a beautiful atmosphere. An actual CALL went out to the lez community to "claim the space before the boys take it over." Within the first month of opening the place was packed with gyrating lesbians, drunk on the joy of having a fancy new place to groove. The boys stayed clear.*

(32 year old ticketing manager, New York City)

The production of spaces, as this story demonstrates, is an active process created by the collective actions of individuals. Because lesbians do not always feel welcome in gay male spaces, they have attempted to carve out their own spaces in cities that reflect the needs of the lesbian community.

Invasion and displacement are problems for urban lesbians. These processes affect where lesbians can live. As lesbians move into discard zones and make them more

desirable, others move in because they like the funky or tolerant and urban feel of these areas. The "community feeling" becomes a drawing card for others to move in. In speaking of two popular non-family oriented neighbourhoods in New York (the East Village and the Lower East Side), a young lesbian wrote:

*Both of these neighbourhoods are very urban. The East Village is considered (by other lesbians) to be somewhat of a lesbian ghetto. The problem is that it is way too expensive for many dykes to actually live there. The East Village is a popular hang out among young college age people and radical political types. There is also a large homeless population. The area is quickly being gentrified (yuk!) but has, for many years, been home to Spanish speaking, generally poor families as well as (mostly) white poor artist types. Those moving in now tend to be young, wealthy, business types but the artists, activists, party goers are still hanging on...at least hanging out, if not living there. The Lower East Side is being gentrified more slowly and is a very diverse place.*

(25 year old student and receptionist, New York City)

Park Slope in Brooklyn, the most well-known lesbian area in New York City, has recently become gentrified, pushing many lesbians to seek other neighbourhoods in which to live.

*I think that lesbians moved to the Slope partly because they could not afford Manhattan (unlike their gay brothers, typically a more affluent group) and wanted to be near each other. Now Park Slope is expensive also and many lesbians can't afford that neighbourhood either.*

(30 year old website producer, New York City).

In examining these urban displacement dynamics, one lesbian who lived for years in Park Slope explains the situation in more detail.

*Dyke Slope was always a very cool, liberal neighbourhood with a large and visible dyke population. In the past two years, with Manhattan real estate being astronomical, the "dot.com diaspora" has discovered The Slope, thus rents have easily tripled, pushing dykes out (one bedroom apts are going for \$2200 a month when they used to be \$650-\$800 3 years ago). Many dykes earn decent salaries, but nothing compared to DINKs [double income no kids] or gay men. This has caused us to move as our leases expire and new rents are now unaffordable since the area has become "desirable." I am moving to a neighbourhood called "Prospect Park." As I run into acquaintances, I discover that I know quite a few dykes who have moved to my new "hood."*

(44 year old bartender and student, New York City)

Gentrification, then, can work to the disadvantage of the very groups that instigated the gentrification process. In Toronto, for example, the problem of high rents in

desirable urban areas is so severe that no lesbian ghetto has developed. Instead, lesbians tend to live in any diverse urban area they can afford. They are drawn to the same types of neighbourhoods as lesbians who live in more affordable cities but are not able to make a significant impact on the urban scene. Even if lesbians cannot create a strong effect on a neighbourhood, their critical mass means that lesbian identity becomes part of the landscape of the neighbourhood.

*It is important because a lot of us live there [Dyke Heights] we have a "critical mass" that gives us power and profile in the area. It is a neighbourhood in which being different is OK. In which a Conservative lawn sign during an election is a far greater anomaly than Gay Pride Flags are. It is a definite geographic area, in which there is space—both physical and psychic—to reinvent our surroundings to reflect our own personal and political priorities.*

(41 year old corporate manager, Winnipeg)

Since safety in being visible as a lesbian is hard to find in heterosexually dominated neighbourhoods, counter cultural enclaves are appealing precisely because they allow (and even encourage) a certain public outness that is pivotal in validating a marginal identity. Being comfortable enough to be out in public was mentioned repeatedly by participants in explaining the lure of the lesbian enclave.

*Urban space is important to claim because the more space we claim as lesbian-safe, the more we can comfortably and safely be "out" in public. Claiming that space is easier the more of us there are in that space—hence the value of Wolseley to our community.*

(41 year old corporate manager, Winnipeg)

While a critical mass of lesbians can be found in lesbian enclaves, many lesbians, of course, do not live in lesbian neighbourhoods. One of the main concerns voiced by "non-ghetto" lesbians is the fact that they do not always feel comfortable being visible as lesbians. In many areas of the city they do not feel safe enough to hold their lover's hand in public. I have argued that strategic visibility is an important political tactic for lesbians. This idea, added to the impetus lesbians have to feel at ease in their identities,

may help explain the reason that many lesbians choose to live in, or spend time in, lesbian/gay areas. Accordingly, it might be expected that lesbians who are more closeted in their lifestyles choose to avoid the lesbian or gay ghetto. Several participants related closetedness to living in suburbia, a certain financial security and a lack of political imperative, although these notions might be based on stereotypes.

*From lesbians I know, or know of, it seems often that those who do well financially and are more closeted may actually separate themselves from areas that may be more identified as lesbian or gay. I know of several lesbians who live (as couples usually, but not always) in suburbia. They seem isolated physically from other lesbians. Their lifestyle almost mirrors straight counterparts, which could also reflect the closeted nature of their lifestyles. (47 year old communications coordinator, Winnipeg)*

Preferences for neighbourhoods and choices of places to live are not based only on lesbian identity. Many lesbians feel that, due to issues such as income and family composition, they do not have a choice as to where they can live. Lesbians of colour, for example, may choose to live in an ethnic or racial ghetto for reasons of racial solidarity. Some lesbians choose not to live open lifestyles. If being out is unimportant for them, the lesbian element of a neighbourhood may mean little to them or be viewed as a place to avoid.<sup>49</sup> Regardless of their own place of residence, many participants stressed the desirability of urban neighbourhoods with many gay people living in them.

*I choose to live in suburbia because it is close to my "country girl" roots and is away from the madness of the city. I suppose if I were to choose a place in the city, it would be the gay ghetto, simply because I feel more welcome there. I feel amongst friends even when amongst strangers. (32 year old graphic designer, Toronto)*

Evidently many lesbians desire to live among others like themselves, even when those like others are strangers. This desire highlights the salience of stranger interactions. A participant from Vancouver made the following statement about Commercial Drive.

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<sup>49</sup> Some lesbians enjoy the challenge of suburbia. A couple in my study lives in a homogenous suburban area and, though they constantly castigate it, they feel a political strength by not ghettoizing themselves.

*It is definitely an area of the city where you can't walk down the street without running into a number of lesbians, and lesbian couples.*

(22 year old student and legal worker, Vancouver)

The lure of the lesbian neighbourhood is the increased probability of seeing and being seen by other lesbians. These areas tend to be located in dense urban environments where there is a high degree of foot traffic and thus a greater opportunity for the creation of non-intimate solidarity. One strategy of empowerment that lesbians use is walking the streets as lesbians. Bumping into (or simply seeing) other lesbians as part of their neighbourhood routines is a pleasure and, for many, a necessary process in the building of their identities. As one lesbian said of the Park Slope area in Brooklyn:

*I've definitely seen some neighbourhoods be more neighbourly than others. Dyke Slope, for instance, is very much so. Strangers smile at each other and offer advice. Once a lesbian came up to me and my then girlfriend (who lives there) and warned us of a mugger in the neighbourhood. I think the feeling of community is definitely enhanced by the visibility factor.*

(30 year old website producer, New York City).

It is tempting to conclude that lesbians move into lesbian enclaves to be with a network of friends. The study suggested, however, that this is not the main attraction of these areas; rather it is that they offer the apparently contradictory comforts of community and anonymity. Whereas community is often viewed as a network of intimates, my study suggests that the creation of solidarity on a less intimate level (e.g., through seeing and engaging with lesbians in public) also builds community. If we redefine community to include the acts of civility that occur between strangers, we will better understand the functions of lesbian strangers in building identity and solidarity. As lesbians engage with each other, both as strangers and friends, on the streets of a neighbourhood they claim those spaces as lesbian ones. I turn next to a more detailed discussion of spatialization processes.

### 3. Creating Lesbian Spaces: The Lesbian Bar and Other Free Territories

Marginalized groups tend to create what Lyman and Scott (1970) refer to as "free territories." These are urban spaces where deviant subcultures have opportunities for "freedom of action" in a world that would otherwise restrict that action. Free territory is carved out of urban public space and affords opportunities for "idiosyncrasy and identity". Lesbian spaces are physical sites where lesbians congregate for a variety of purposes and where lesbian identity can be affirmed and validated in a culture that would otherwise render them invisible (Retter, 1997). Before Stonewall, lesbian public spaces were limited to a few bars (often shared with gay men and other sexual deviants), softball fields and discrete strips of beaches such as Fire Island (Retter, 1997; Wolfe, 1997; Nestle, 1997).<sup>50</sup> With the advent of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s, gay and lesbian spaces have been growing and options for lesbians in terms of free territories have developed tremendously.

In the early days of the gay rights and feminist movements, many lesbian feminists attacked the gay bar as a repressive and apolitical environment. Recently writers have criticized this dismissal of the importance of bars to the lesbian community and have argued that these predominantly working class pre-Stonewall environments served as spaces of resistance and that, in these "pre-political" atmospheres, collective lesbian interaction laid the foundation for the modern lesbian community (Nestle, 1997; Wolfe, 1997). Without benefit of public support or political theory, 1950s lesbians defended these territories and their right to engage in resistant behaviour and assert an emerging collective consciousness. In the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s, bars

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<sup>50</sup> The Stonewall riot, which took place in Greenwich Village, was the major precipitating event which sparked the modern gay rights movement.

were the few free territories where lesbians could express their lesbian identity. Wolfe (1997: 319-320) points out the continuing significance of the lesbian bar to the lesbian community.

The bars function as 'public places' for lesbians to meet other lesbians, the only 'public places' in most of the United States and the world. And lesbian bars are the places where, most often, lesbians 'come out' (that is, make a statement to themselves and to others that they are lesbians).

The symbolic meaning of the lesbian bar and its function as a free territory cannot be denied. The bar has become an institution in many lesbian communities. However, lesbians have ambivalent feelings about lesbian bars. While all the participants mentioned the bar as a lesbian "home territory," many of them hesitate to see the bar as a haven of lesbian territory. Especially in smaller cities, there appears to be an overburden of emphasis on the bar, which, as a single space, cannot satisfy such a diverse group.

Exclusionary dynamics are evident in many lesbian bars, as certain groups struggle to make their reality dominant. In the study, issues around age were mentioned frequently. In earlier times, all ages mixed in lesbian bars (Nestle, 1987), however, the issue of age has become more contentious over the years. Age-related clashes take place within the bars as several generations struggle to make the space more comfortable to their tastes. For example, the increasingly younger clientele at the one lesbian bar in Winnipeg has moved the older lesbians to create a separate night at a gay male bar which is humorously referred to in the community as "Old Ladies Night."

*I think age really separates the larger community in Winnipeg. It seems like the older dykes go to the bar because that is what they've always done. It's a safe space. Maybe the progressive acceptance of lesbianism has allowed younger dykes to rely on the bar less, as a meeting place. Besides many people just don't like going to bars and maybe feel like there are other choices. (I just don't know what the hell they are).*

(28 year old, convenience store assistant clerk, Winnipeg)

The fact that the bar has been one of the few public places to meet potential partners has created an atmosphere (or a collective memory) of jealousy, competition and other sexually charged emotions. While there are interactional dynamics in all lesbian spaces, these problems were not as evident in other lesbian territories. Non-bar lesbian spaces were spoken of by participants as encouraging stranger social interaction and a sense of lesbian solidarity. Concerts, and other public events that draw in a lesbian crowd, for example, were often seen as inviting openness in connecting with strangers.

*If women are together in a lesbian-friendly environment such as a women's music festival or resource centre, I think they may relax and be open. I think this might not apply to lesbian bars. I do not always find them so friendly between strangers. It may be because the atmosphere is also more sexually charged so people might be more cautious. I am still usually friendly though but don't find other lesbians to always be so open.*  
(47 year old communications coordinator, Winnipeg)

In discussing the lesbian bar in Winnipeg one participant articulates this problem:

*I did not find this to be a friendly space at all. I found individual lesbians to be very friendly, but in this particular public space, I found it to be needlessly serious and I always felt non-verbally urged to restrain my behaviour. I felt as though people were perpetually concerned about their partners and who was looking at whom etc. I was too often concerned that other women felt that I was smiling at their date, or being too friendly, or even having too much fun.*  
(28 year old PhD student and T.A., Toronto)

The pressure in bars surrounding dating and sex, then, has meant that as territories they are not always relaxing. Another participant acknowledges that she treats lesbians in bars entirely differently than the lesbians she sees in other public places.

*I say hi to all the dykes I see on the streets but if I see someone come into the bar I quickly size her up as a sex partner (I am single). Also if a dyke is friendly to me in a bar I never understand if it's sexual or not. Is she interested in getting together as a date or as a pal? I've asked a few dykes about this and they share my confusion about social interaction in bars.*  
(44 year old bartender and student, New York City)

Due to the historical and social construction of the bar as a place to meet lovers, lesbians in bars may ignore strangers unless they find them desirable. The fact that

respondents said that lesbians they see in the bars are less friendly than lesbians they see in straight public spaces raises an interesting point. It is possible that because everyone in the bar is assumed to be lesbian, lesbians in bars do not feel impelled to extend solidarity to each other the way they do in straight public places. The following comment suggests that in straight spaces lesbian interaction strategies are geared towards recognition and acknowledgement and that in lesbian spaces they become more sexual.

*In gay spaces I just assume that most women are lesbians so I drop any identifying strategies and just work on making some sort of contact with whomever I think is cute.*  
(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

Interaction in bars contains an element of risk and that risk creates a situation that is not always conducive to friendliness between strangers.<sup>51</sup> Lesbians may be less likely to be friendly in bars due to risk of rejection in a sexually charged environment. One participant, who works in a convenience store, argues that it is easier to be friendly and casual with lesbians she sees in her store than those she sees in the bar.

*At work I have my "work personality" on, so I can engage in small talk and be charming. I don't feel I have anything to lose because it is not a social environment. I don't think it is appropriate to ask for dates there, so I don't feel nervous with the possibility of rejection. The dyke bar is the opposite for me, because it's there to meet people, so I feel pressure and doubt about my own desirability. I am less likely to feel comfortable enough to approach anyone and talk.*  
(28 year old convenience store assistant, Winnipeg)

Situational factors help in defining the meaning of behaviour. The meaning of flirting is different when it occurs outside the sexually oriented context of the bar. In the bar, flirting is more likely to signify sexual intent. In non-lesbian public places, it can be interpreted as a sign of lesbian solidarity (a way of signifying shared sexuality).

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<sup>51</sup> Sexual tensions may be a problem in bars generally but considering that lesbians have so few spaces to meet and express their identity openly, such tension may be a more serious problem in lesbian bars.

Lesbians who are more out might dismiss the importance of bars but, for many lesbians, bars have provided some the few public spaces where they feel free to express a lesbian identity. In the study, I found that the more closeted a lesbian is, the more important the bar is as a place to express her identity. Traditionally gay bars have been a safe space to approach strangers because it was assumed that few straight people would frequent them. The risk of being outed in an inappropriate space is reduced in gay bars.

*If you are "out" you will meet other dykes no matter where you go. But for less "out" women, I would think that dyke-centred spaces would give them more courage.*  
(36 year old freelance personal manager, New York City)

The options lesbians have for meeting are largely limited to specifically lesbian spaces. Decades ago Carol Warren (1974:17) made this observation in her study of gay identity:

Straight people may find companionship, sex and lifetime love in all kinds of settings, from church to workplace; gay people may neither find others like themselves there, nor be gay in those settings.

Due, perhaps, to the pressure of the bar as the main lesbian meeting place, lesbians often desire the possibility of meeting other lesbians in non-lesbian spaces. One New Yorker talked about how validating it was to meet her partner in a non-lesbian space.

She talks about the day she met her girlfriend:

*We were at a Janis Ian concert and got to talking about Janis Ian but then about our jobs, the usual small talk. For some reason, I knew she was a lesbian and Jewish! Part of that was the fact that we were seeing Janice Ian who is openly gay...but she has plenty of straight fans too. Part of it was the fact that the woman had lots of curly hair, an earnest face with Jewish looking nose and no make-up. She was also wearing solid shoes (Dr. Martens). I guess I went by appearances. She assumed I was gay because I was chatting her up and then asked for her phone number. It was validating for me because it felt so downright normal. In our predominantly heterosexual society, you often have to look for lesbians in specifically lesbian spaces. It isn't often that we meet mates in spaces that straights do; like a concert or a grocery store or a park.*

(30 year old website producer, New York City)

As a collective movement of resistance many lesbians are working to reclaim “normal” public spaces and their right to meet each other in those spaces. Increasingly there is a struggle to create “free spaces” in general heterosexual space, underscoring the value of strategies of engagements between lesbian strangers. The more lesbians acknowledge each other in heterosexually-dominated spaces, the more possibility is created for lines of action that are lesbian oriented, including the possibility of meeting potential lovers.<sup>52</sup>

Looking for love, of course, is not the only reason lesbians seek to interact with each other in non-lesbian spaces. Increasingly, lesbians are trying to make their reality dominant in general public places. One of the ways that lesbians create home territories in straight-oriented public space is by temporarily claiming those spaces by using the power inherent in numbers. Any straight space can become imbued with lesbian meaning (lesbianized) at any time that lesbians populate that space.

*One day I walked into an organic food store. Six other lesbians happened to be shopping there. There were also a few straight people. Some of us were strangers to each other and others knew each other as acquaintances (there was also one couple). Using both personal and categorical knowing, we read each other's identities and acted based on those readings. The atmosphere became charged with lesbian energy. The discussion became focused on our reality and our issues. In fact, I found several lesbians to give my survey to. It was apparent that the straight people around felt outnumbered by us. Our discussion became oriented around how lesbians recognize each other when I brought up my survey. Due to the power of numbers and perceived safety, no one was trying to hide the lesbian quality of the interaction.*

(Fieldnotes)

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<sup>52</sup>It has been becoming steadily safer for lesbians to come out in places other than bars since the advent of the gay rights movement. Nestle (1987), however, argues that “pre-Stonewall” lesbians (i.e., butches and femmes) walking the streets of New York or attending gay beaches did risk displaying their identities and were stigmatized for it. Lesbians in current times may be forging their identities in public in greater numbers under freer conditions but lesbians in more restrictive times also engaged in space claiming acts.

Evidently this gathering had the same effect on the other lesbian interactants who were present and part of the encounter that day. A lesbian, who had been in the store shopping with her partner after work and had taken my survey, e-mailed as follows:

*I have been thinking about this whole thing since the organic food store convergence yesterday evening. There were enough of us to be the norm (I gave [partner] a kiss!) and the hets a minority. There is always power in numbers. That serendipitous gathering of us dykes was an example of how even in retail space owned by a het woman, we can claim it as ours WHEN there are enough of us to take over the energy and give each other safety.*

(41 year old corporate director, Winnipeg)

This respondent does not normally display affection with her partner in public but felt inspired to do so in the store in which lesbian identity had momentarily become the norm. In the course of the conversation I drew in another stranger. I had tagged her as a lesbian by appearance cues and by her behaviour as she locked eye contact with me when I noticed her listening to our conversation. Feeling the energy created by the temporarily lesbian territory, I had engaged in ritualistic low-level flirting when I approached her and asked her if she had e-mail. Her response was to reply jokingly: "Hey I am not that easy!" Had a lesbian norm not been created in this space these opportunities for contact may not have occurred.

As a strategy of building alliances, then, lesbians sometimes take over spaces and in the process create these spaces as ones where social interaction between lesbians is encouraged. These actions directly contradict the heterosexist notion that gay people should be discrete in public places.

The food store scenario raises the theoretical proposition that some spaces engender social interaction more than others. Do they? When asked if interaction is affected by space, a New Yorker points to the fact that social actors frequent social spaces in which they will feel free (or inspired) to engage in a certain type of interaction.

*The character and type of public place affects all people in public places. This is a point which can be made for any nook on earth, that environments have personality, politics, presentation, structure and thus those drawn to them are seeking those specific paradigms for socializing.*  
(24 year old rock singer and songwriter, New York City)

While some spaces encourage interaction between strangers, the motivations of the social actors frequenting the space cannot be overlooked.

*Public places such as parks or large public gatherings obviously engender social interaction as well as bars and open-mixers. If lesbians are adept at recognizing one another then connections can be made. It takes more than a "place" it takes a certain type of person. She must want to meet people; she must be approachable.*  
(51 year old teacher, New York City)

A lesbian must be willing to respond to other lesbians in order for social interaction to take place. She must be willing to momentarily disregard, or breach, norms of public realm engagement. The norm of civil inattention that structures public spaces makes it hard to approach strangers. An opener is required to break down this civil inattention (Goffman, 1959). Sometimes a kinship claim can be made based merely on the subtle opener of recognized shared identities. However, the conditions surrounding the encounter come into effect. Sometimes shared sexual identity is simply not enough to invite interaction. The situation also has to be conducive. I have discussed some of the favourable situations of which lesbians take advantage; however, lesbians also use the same types of openers that straight people do to connect in public.<sup>53</sup>

*People in NYC always seem to be rushing when they are in public places-so there is little time for stranger to stranger interaction (i.e., on the street, stores, buses, trains). These places are often too crowded to encourage much interaction-people are too busy creating a little breathing room for themselves. The exceptions to the examples given come when something unusual happens-major bus/train delays, waiting in line an extra long time, an accident on the street, a fire, etc. People tend to congregate in those situations and speak to one another (complain, ask questions, etc.). I personally use this opportunity to connect with someone in line/crowd who I perceive to be queer (especially a dyke).*  
(25 year old student and receptionist, New York City)

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<sup>53</sup> Drawing on the work of observers of urban interaction such as William Whyte, Lofland (1998) outlines some of these conditions which serve as "openers" and invite social interaction.

Lesbians often try to connect with other lesbians in public places, especially when an opener has made norms of urban civil inattention breachable. Because connecting with lesbian strangers often provides a sense of comfort and validation in straight environments, lesbians may be on the lookout for these openers. Thus, openers may occur more frequently between lesbian strangers than they do between non-lesbian strangers. The study suggested that lesbians frequented spaces where the probability of connecting with lesbian strangers was higher. There are predictable urban spaces that are more conducive to meeting strangers in general and lesbian strangers in particular. An urban park where people take their dogs was mentioned several times.

*One of my favourite spaces for lesbian spotting is the local off-leash dog park. Because of the dog connection and the fact that you are hanging around for a while and usually go at the same time, connections are easy to make.*  
(41 year old professor, Winnipeg)

*"Dog parks" create an interesting social scene as owners congregate while the dogs play. The dog run I take my dog to (Tomkin Square Park in the heart of the East Village) has been dubbed "the dyke run" by friends of mine. Most of the human interaction that takes place there is small talk about dogs. I often meet people's dogs and have extended conversations with the owners without ever exchanging names. Odd as this dynamic is, it creates the perfect opportunity to make conversation and I often find myself speaking with (women I perceive to be) dykes.*  
(25 year old student and receptionist, New York City)

Jane Jacobs (1961) has stressed the salience of the types of casual social interaction that occurs in these urban dog runs, public parks and other vibrant spaces such as commercial areas on streets. She refers to the relationships and interactions that characterize these types of engagements as "sidewalk terms."

It is possible in a city...to know all kinds of people without unwelcome entanglements, without boredom, necessity for excuses, explanations, fears of giving offence, embarrassments respecting impositions or commitments and all such paraphernalia of obligations which accompany less limited relationships. It is possible to be on excellent sidewalk terms with people who are very different from oneself. (1961: 62)

The value of being on sidewalk terms with strangers and casual acquaintances was supported by many comments in the survey data. It is easiest to engage lesbian strangers in spaces such as outdoor cafés or other high pedestrian traffic areas of cities where casual interaction occurs as a normal course of events and there is no expectation of more intimate connections. These types of places encourage more interaction precisely because the risk of “unwanted entanglements” (Jacobs, 1961) is much lower.

*It is a whole lot easier to strike up a conversation with a lesbian stranger outdoors, it seems easier, less confined and easy to flee if need be.*  
(46 year old postal worker and massage therapist, Winnipeg)

Taking into consideration the historical confining of lesbian social engagements to underground places, it is no surprise that gay people are now enjoying the thrill of interaction with other gay people in non-gay public places. This strategy of increasing gay visibility by coming out on the streets (or any spaces not purposely designed for gay interaction) has become a progressively more significant method of rejecting the confined space of the closet.

Such visibility reacts against the confined space of the “closet” which has been perhaps the most compelling metaphor for visibility and identity within gay and lesbian narratives...the closet symbolizes the space of denial, darkness, confinement. To come out depends upon emerging from the spatial structures of the closet and into the public, onto the street. Therefore the process of attaining authentic gay identity relies on the movement from one space to another--from the closet to the street. (Polchin, 1997: 386)

Each time lesbians meet and engage with each other in public places, they contribute to the collective creation of lesbian spaces within the city. They create the experience of the public realm as one of connection, not isolation and refuse to experience it as one of alienation.

*A ride on any public transportation system can be greatly improved by the presence of other lesbians. Hotels, bars, and elevators are excellent spots to find other dykes. Grocery stores can be decent too as you always have an excuse to talk to someone. I look for lesbians everywhere. Especially at straight functions. It's kind of a game and it makes the experience less lonely.*  
(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

To show the links between the strategies the study has analyzed and processes of territorialization, I will provide a detailed encounter. The episode illustrates the unfolding of an interactional sequence in which appearance cues, mutually read, led to recognition, followed by more detailed presentation of self. Ritual acknowledgement progressed into an encounter. The encounter created feelings of solidarity. A public space was no longer alienating for two lesbians but momentarily became a space to celebrate lesbian identity.

*I was on a city bus. The bus was extremely crowded with people pushing and shoving their way home. A woman sat down next to me and, although we did not initially acknowledge one another, I read her as a dyke right away. She was middle-aged, with a short haircut and style that I read as 70s feminist lesbian. (I don't like to put people in boxes, but I remember thinking that about her). I just now realized that I did something I often do when I see others I perceive as queers...I picked up my backpack so that the rainbow beads I have on the zipper were visible. Whether or not any conversation takes place, I know I feel a sense of connection with others when I know they've recognized a common sign.) I got out my book and began reading. I noticed the woman next to me peering over at the page I was reading. Normally I'd be irritated by this, but, I was interested to connect with this woman I perceived to be "family" in this straight crowd. I acknowledged her glance by looking back in a friendly way. She mentioned her surprise to see the book—said she knew the author long ago, didn't know she had written a book. So we spoke about the book and then about Bluestockings (i.e., where one might buy the book) and then she mentioned that she hosts a poetry night at Bluestockings once a month. We got off the bus at the same stop and went our separate ways...but, speaking with her even just briefly, created a sense of connection to the community in me that stayed with me the whole day.*

(25 year old student and receptionist New York City)

As lesbians interact in urban space (whether it is a fleeting recognition ritual or a prolonged encounter), then, they leave an imprint of that interaction on that space which becomes part of both individual and collective cognitive maps of the city. Take the organic food store incident discussed earlier. Perhaps the individual lesbians have

shopped in that store before and were surrounded, as usual, by heterosexual people. Their perception of the store will be based on those heterosexually dominated experiences. On that particular day the space became temporarily a lesbian one. When the lesbian interactants left the store, it went back to being a vibrant organic food store, guided by norms of the dominant heterosexual culture. In the memories of the interactants who were there that day, however, it has become a lesbian territory. Reasons for frequenting the store may be altered, perhaps unconsciously. As lesbians tell their friends about the experience, these friends may become more likely to shop there. Word of mouth is one of the ways in which spaces in cities become known as lesbian territories.

The processes described in the food store or on the city bus occur constantly in public places. Although lesbian territorialization is more likely to take place in diverse urban environments, it is not limited to tolerant spaces. In Winnipeg, the Home Depot store has gradually become a place where lesbians appear in greater numbers and thus Home Depot has become known as a good place for dyke spotting. In an encounter with a couple I met in a laundromat, I learned that they had met at Home Depot. One of the women, who worked at the store, claims she took the job to meet a girlfriend.

The collective interactions of social actors create an environment and thus the more lesbians are visible to each other (and to straight people) the more spaces they can claim where they will be safe to express and celebrate their lesbian identities. Decades ago lesbians and gays began claiming urban spaces by forging them in bars and other discreet public places. Over the last four decades, as gay politics progressed, lesbians and gays began to create gay or lesbian territories in urban areas. These became spaces

where lesbians could express their sexual identity in some degree of safety, in tolerant and diverse surroundings. Now, however, there is a collective drive for more extensive public space claiming. Lesbians, it appears, often recognize the potential power that exists in the minute and fleeting interactional encounters between lesbian strangers, although they often felt that lesbians, as women, were still too cautious and often missed out on the creation of non-intimate lesbian solidarity.

*I don't think we connect enough in public places. We would be so much stronger, so much more supported if we took more initiative to connect with strangers (lesbian strangers that is). (25 year old student and receptionist, New York City)*

The next chapter will explore the theoretical significance of both the connections and non-connections made between lesbian strangers in public places.

## **Chapter Six: Lesbian Community**

My assumption, in detailing public realm interaction, has been that the ways in which lesbians engage each other in public places have consequences on a community level.<sup>54</sup> In this chapter, I will discuss the connections between micro level social actions and macro concerns of communities in four interrelated sections: The first section presents a theoretical argument for the salience of stranger association. Here I return to the urbanist critique of community and discuss the limitations of a focus on primary bonds. Second, I outline two forms of solidarity. Third, I discuss lesbian social interaction in the different social realms showing the links between anonymous engagements between lesbians in public places and more intimate lesbian interaction in parochial spaces. Finally, I make a case for widespread critical reflection on public realm social interaction.

### **1. The Limitations of Community**

A persistent questioning of the moral tone behind the ideology of the “primacy of the primary” (Lofland, 1990) can be found scattered throughout the literature in urban sociology. These critiques have grown steadily as empirical work on urban non-intimate associations has called into question previous assumptions about the emptiness of stranger engagements. As the results of urban ethnographies have revealed, the

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<sup>54</sup> Community is one of the slipperiest concepts in the social sciences and there are many efforts in the literature to define it. I choose to bypass debates on the meaning of community, not because I am unaware of them, but because I suspect that conceptual confusion results from over-analysis of a term that is fairly clear in commonsense language. See Nielsen (1992) for a discussion of the concept of community and how it applies to lesbians.

complexity and depth of urban stranger interaction (see Lofland, 1992 for a review of this literature), it would be hard to maintain the stance that in urban spaces, stranger interaction is devoid of meaning. Even those who are committed to the superiority of primary over secondary bonds have sometimes acknowledged the dangers of viewing community as an unmitigated ideal. For example, this statement by a community sociologist warns against the dismissal of less intimate types of social bonds.

Weak ties, often denounced as generative of alienation (Wirth, 1938) are...indispensable to individuals' opportunities...strong ties breeding local cohesion, lead to overall fragmentation. (Granovetter, 1982: 1378, quoted in Lofland 1990: 193)

Several scholars take the argument further, scrutinizing the negative societal repercussions of placing higher moral significance on intimate ties over less enduring ones. In 1961, Jane Jacobs' critique of city planning castigated the "togetherness model" used in creating intentional communities. The ideology behind this approach to urban planning, Jacobs contends, is based on a profound misunderstanding of the way cities work and an unfortunate disregard for the uses of stranger interaction in creating trust, safety and contact on the street level. Modern city planners base their (often disastrous) planning decisions on the misguided assumption that people are happy only when they have everything in common. According to Jacobs, the belief that communities should be based on the type of intimacy found in the private sphere has created more isolation because when people are forced to choose between sharing everything or nothing, they will often choose nothing. Urbanites, Jacobs argued, need a degree of anonymity and privacy. Forcing people to be intimate while depriving them of opportunities for less entangled bonds results in stultified relationships.

Urbanists have written about community as a “tragic ideal”. Most noted among proponents of the dark side of community is Richard Sennett. In a collection of powerful, historically based books Sennett argues that the quest for community in modern society has led to a stress on intimacy and “authentic” bonds. This ideology, he believes, privileges homogeneity over heterogeneity, with its effects reaching into all realms of society. The quest for the comfort and predictability of intimate bonds and the resulting dismissal of the more fleeting bonds found in the “disorder of cities” leads to a society of “immature psyches” (Sennett, 1970).<sup>55</sup> People avoid the public realm and encounters with strangers out of fear of chaos and difference, thereby becoming increasingly incompetent at dealing with diversity and instability in their everyday lives.

Following this line of thinking, other writers have bemoaned the loss of civility in a society that increasingly devalues the impersonal public life that strangers and public places offer. A society-wide privileging of private realm relationships has led people away from the public realm as a source of entertainment and “accidental and informal exchange of views, tasks, dreams, aspirations” (Goldston, 1970; 132). Informal exchanges between diverse people, free from the entanglements and obligations of private places, become less and less available as people begin to fear the world of strangers. Ray Oldenburg (1982) has written about the need for a “third place,” away from the parochial or private realms where individuals can gather voluntarily and share in less personal ways than they do in more intimate surroundings. As public spaces become more purified and sanitized in modern cities, we increasingly lose these third

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<sup>55</sup>Sennett (1977) argues that this fear of difference is played out in many neighbourhoods, which have become homogenized and insulated from diversity and thus less able to cope with threats to homogeneity. He refers to this tendency as “destructive Gemeinschaft.”

places. This loss results in a society where people actually become less civil when they are in public, as collective practices of stranger association diminish.

Perhaps most useful to the present study is the approach to public realm analysis that, assuming the salience of non-intimate social interaction, attempts to connect the rituals and encounters occurring in public spaces to larger social structures. While this approach is still empirically undeveloped, the most valuable theoretical analyses come from social theorists such as Anthony Giddens who use the empirical resources found in Goffman's work on interaction rituals in public places to explain aspects of human nature and the creation of social structure.

Basing his premises on Durkheim's theory of the significance of rituals to the moral order of any society, Giddens (1984) argues that in the public realm a sense of trust (ontological security) and a common humanity are constantly assessed, created and recreated by strangers who encounter each other. One of the ways to secure trust in the disorder and chaos of cities is through the constant and ongoing re-enactment of interaction rituals. These rituals make city life predictable (and possible) and bring into being the structures of the society in which we live (structuration). In urban public places, social actors participate in the creation of social structure by constantly engaging in rituals of deference and demeanour (Goffman, 1967) in which they habitually display respect for others and create a fabric of social life that is based on trust and security. This public realm civility differs from the forms of human association that are found among intimates and acquaintances but is equally important to the creation of human solidarity. Brissett and Oldenberg (1994: 163) capture the essence of this public realm civility:

It neither promises nor offers the closeness and engrossment of intimate relationships. Neither acceptance or approval nor even understanding characterizes civility: only a decency born of the appreciation of our active mutuality with diverse others. That such an appreciation emerges almost effortlessly within a thriving informal public sociability, demonstrates both the vigour and promise of human association.

These arguments of critical urbanists might appear pessimistic and even, at first glance, extraneous. As I will show, however, they are highly relevant to this work in which I will take the empirical materials of this dissertation and apply them to problems of exclusion in the lesbian subculture. Lesbians, like other modern social actors, have also stressed the search for community as a way to combat oppression and celebrate identity. This drive to base our relationships, as lesbians, on the goal of intimacy is connected to a deep-seated and society-wide quest to know others as we know ourselves (Sennett, 1970). Sennett believes that this "celebration of inter-subjectivity" (at the expense of more anonymous forms of interaction and knowing) results in a form of "widespread and disabling narcissism" (1977: 340). With this well-intentioned but misguided goal there is certain conceptual baggage that has very real results. As Young (1990: 300), a critic of the "ideal of community," points out:

The ideal of community...privileges unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of the limits of one's understanding of others from their point of view. Community is an understandable dream, expressing a desire for selves that are transparent to one another, relationships of mutual identification, social closeness and comfort. The dream is understandable but politically problematic...because those motivated by it will tend to suppress differences among themselves or implicitly to exclude...persons with whom they do not identify.

Subculturally, an ideology pervades lesbian communities that assumes that intimate bonds are the model relationships through which to engender solidarity and

social change. Yet, when asked to reflect on their primary relationships, friendship networks and groups, most of the lesbians in my study acknowledge exclusionary group dynamics. If we follow the logic of critics who believe that community suppresses diversity (Sennett, 1977; Young, 1990) group conflict seems inevitable. I do not claim that conflict in group situations is unnecessary (or even undesirable). I suggest, rather, that critical reflection on what takes place interactionally in these groups will reveal the inadequacy of stressing intimate relationships as the main means of engendering social change and sustaining lesbian identity and solidarity. Furthermore, if we want to understand the problems occurring within lesbian communities, it is productive to examine the ways lesbians interact with strangers perceived to be lesbian.

### **Forms of Solidarity**

In order to compare and link public and parochial social interaction, it is necessary to look at two forms of solidarity. It is through the production of solidarity that human beings merge with each other and through this solidarity a moral order is formed out of the chaos that is the social world (Giddens, 1984). Solidarity can be produced whenever human beings come into contact. Yet the way solidarity is formed varies in the different social realms (i.e., public, parochial and private).

Carl Couch refers to "solidary relationships" as those more personal bonds people form. As Lofland (1998) has argued, these are the intimate types of bonds created in private spaces and, to a lesser extent, in parochial ones where people know each other personally. In the public realm people are strangers to each other, thus solidarity is created, not through the establishment of solidary relationships, but through "solidary

responsiveness.” Solidary responsiveness is established when strangers “categorically characterize themselves as having a collective identity that distinguishes them from others” (Couch, 1989: 133). The power of solidary relationships between lesbians in private and parochial spaces has long been recognized. As networks of friends engage with each other or as groups work together on common political causes, solidary bonds are created which strengthen the community. What has been overlooked is the power of non-intimate connections between lesbians. Up to this point, the focus of this dissertation has been on the creation of this type of solidary responsiveness between lesbian strangers.

### **Tensions Between Solidarity and Exclusion**

In studying the creation of solidarity between lesbians in public places, I have also alluded to exclusion and alienation felt by some lesbians as they are overlooked or ignored by lesbian strangers. To develop an analysis of marginalization in lesbian communities, it is necessary to compare (and link) interaction in lesbian parochial spaces with interaction in public places. Although interaction between strangers and interaction between acquaintances and intimates represent different types of interaction they are not unconnected.

Lesbian parochial spaces are those gatherings that take the form of social groups where lesbians meet for political or social purposes. Relationships in these spaces exist in obvious contrast to the more anonymous, unpredictable, and heterogeneous public

world where lesbians meet other lesbians primarily as strangers.<sup>56</sup> In parochial spaces, lesbians strive to base their relationships with one another on the type of intimate knowing found in the more closely knit private world of primary groups. In these situations, a “togetherness model” (Jacobs, 1961) predominates, guiding norms of social engagement. This ideology (and the social action on which it is based) has far reaching consequences. It has the effect of building strong solidary relationships but it also creates, often irresolvable, conflict when differences are confronted. Couch (1989:140) makes this point.

Of course, solidary relationships are composed of diverse people. But diversity and ranking are minimized. Members of robust solidary relationships make a special effort to deny their diversity.

I asked participants about dynamics occurring in lesbian groups. Many felt that the lesbian community, while it served as a safe space for lesbians to express and celebrate a lesbian identity in a homophobic society, was laced with problems of exclusion, barely suppressed intolerance, power struggles and cliques.

*While I think we would like to think “our community” embraces diversity, the fact of the matter, is that our friends tend to be very similar to ourselves, particularly around class and educational issues. Professional (semi-closet) women will not hang out with dykes. Leather, S/M practitioners tend to elicit polarized responses. Bi-sexual women tend to get something of a cold shoulder.*

(41 year old professor, Winnipeg)

The divisions lesbians face in groups seem to force individuals to defend their identities and ideologies. While conflict over diversity may be a universal problem, especially in groups with a political impetus (Young, 1990), this conflict may be particularly troublesome for lesbians who often face homophobic exclusion in non-lesbian group

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<sup>56</sup>In defining lesbian parochial spaces, I refer to places such as resource centres, support groups, collectives or political groups. While we might think of lesbian bars as parochial spaces, bars tend to exhibit a more anonymous atmosphere and thus are a more public environment.

situations. Participants felt that lesbians, although claiming to accept diversity, were in fact threatened by it. The most common dividers mentioned were based on age, race and social class. Many participants mentioned serious tensions in lesbian groups where personal identities were more mixed and where diversity was more likely to be encountered in personal situations. They often offered this information even in parts of the survey where I did not ask for it, suggesting that it is a crucial concern.

*There is serious racial tension within the dyke communities. I am most aware of it in the more political community, perhaps because there is more likely to be discussion about these issues (versus the party scene which tends to be segregated). There has been some fierce argument at Bluestockings [a lesbian bookstore collective] as groups have accused each other of racism.*  
(25 year old receptionist and student, New York City)

*As far as age/class/race matters: I was very involved in the Lesbian Avengers and the NYC chapter ended because of this. Caucasian dykes started the L.A. but really tried to engage dykes of colour and have revolving leadership--unfortunately it didn't work. I remember dykes of colour stating that it was overwhelming to enter a room with 100 white women. I appreciate that sentiment but also added that it was difficult for all of us--because it felt as if each one of us was being "sized up" too, even though I appreciate that dykes of colour have additional pressures. As a working class dyke, I often feel low self-esteem when in the presence of Ivy League educated/trust fund babies. Even though I know intellectually that I am just as smart, there is a level of entitlement I am never going to have.*  
(44 year old bartender and student, New York City)

In the latter statement, as interpreted by the participant, problems in the political group known as the Lesbian Avengers (e.g., accusations of racism by non-white lesbians or the defensiveness of white lesbians) eventually interfered with the group's goals and led to its dissolution. The following statement is from a lesbian who has been politically active in numerous lesbian groups since she came out in the 1970s.

*Diversity is the BIG challenge of all progressive politics--it used to be enough to be lesbian or lesbian positive and be accepted and OK. Now, there are 'splinter' groups for every imaginable sub-culture and we are supposed to understand and respect them all. Given my financial security, my ownership of a house and a cottage and a Volvo station wagon; a successful career in the corporate world, and because I am in a long term monogamous relationship, I would be disowned by less materially rich dykes for whom the concept of "property is theft" (or the very least 'middle class yuck') and the notion of a marriage equivalent is distasteful.*  
(41 year old corporate director, Winnipeg)

This passage offers an understanding of the issue of social class from the perspective of an upper class lesbian. Participants from working class backgrounds often feel looked down upon by “*rich trust fund babies*” (in the words of the New York bartender) and it is evident that some “*less materially rich dykes*” are threatened by the lifestyles of middle and upper class lesbians. Several participants said that they often felt uncomfortable in lesbian spaces, especially when they perceived themselves as outsiders to the standards and norms prevailing in the group.

*I think there are public spaces where lesbians are supposed to connect—but I feel isolated just as much in those spaces (and more sadly so), as I do in straight spaces. I find living in a subculture creates the same kind of internal pressure to conform as the straight world does.*  
(46 year old letter carrier and massage therapist, Winnipeg)

The drive for intimacy that prevails in lesbian-oriented spaces, then, creates a quest for homogeneity that may be unconscious but nevertheless has profound repercussions. Do lesbians play out these exclusionary tendencies as they interact in public places the way they do when they interact in parochial ones? The answer is both yes and no. That is, public realm interactions have the potential to exist as social engagements free from exclusionary dynamics but these conflicts and dynamics do take place in the public arena, though they are often so subtle they go unnoticed.

In presenting this notion of the dual nature of non-intimate sociality, I will look at participants’ experiences in public and parochial spaces. First I will explore the way that public engagement between lesbian strangers contains the potential to transcend the divisions often played out in community settings and then I will address the subtle ways that small-scale exclusionary dynamics are created on the street level.

In discussing the differences between lesbian interaction occurring in general public spaces versus those lesbian interactions occurring in lesbian based spaces, one New Yorker made the following set of observations:

*You asked "why are divisions more relevant in lesbian spaces." I would start by discussing public space. Lesbians are generally invisible in public spaces and there is always potential for the environment to be a hostile one for any lesbian who becomes visible. Given this, when recognition is made-one dyke to another-a mirror is created and there is a sense of safety in numbers. This connection creates a moment of comfort and connection that is extremely satisfying. Lesbian specific spaces create that sense of safety and connection, on a more sustained level. Within this relative "safety" and connection other differences become visible. I feel I need to be careful here and emphasize that I am not implying that in public spaces sexuality takes precedence over other identity categories such as race, class, etc... That is absolutely not the case. I am merely stating that, regardless of differences, recognition of dyke sexuality often seems to bring at least momentary connection. Whereas, in lesbian spaces other societal categories become visible/explicit and sometimes become barriers as individuals attempt to deepen relationships beyond "You're a dyke, I'm a dyke."*  
(25 year old student and receptionist, New York City)

Within this statement is found the very important point that lesbian strangers often acknowledge each other regardless of differences. This participant had related a story, quoted earlier, about riding a bus and engaging in a fleeting encounter with a lesbian who was quite different from herself in age, gender presentation and political orientation. Despite those differences, they shared a moment of connection, based on shared sexual identity. I will restate an important point from her scenario:

*We got off at the same stop and went our separate ways...but, speaking with her, even just briefly, created a sense of connection to community in me that stayed with me throughout the day.*  
(25 year old student and receptionist, New York City)

Lesbians encountering each other in the heterosexually dominated public world often report experiencing a momentary sense of solidarity or connection. When the knowing is mainly categorical this solidary responsiveness can occur regardless of differences. The "you're a dyke, I'm a dyke" connection is brief, and although not shallow, is based mainly on mutual validation of sexual identity. Differences such as

those based on race, social class, age or political orientation may be noticed but do not have to be confronted in the moment of the encounter, as the situation does not contain any expectations of intimate sharing. Furthermore, less visible differences such as those based on lifestyle or social values and beliefs do not necessarily become relevant, as they can be less detectable, although they are often inferred through stereotypes. Fleeting public realm encounters, then, do not necessarily encourage the suppression of diversity found in more intimate settings.

Once lesbians enter lesbian spaces, a relative safety is created that extends the meaning of interaction beyond the impetus to acknowledge (and protect) each other as fellow lesbians. Within this safe environment, differences which may be visible in public spaces but seldom pose an immediate threat, often lead to conflict as people are forced to build solidary relationships on a more intimate form of knowing. And since this intimate form of knowing carries with it an ideology based on the superiority of sharing values and sameness, social dynamics come into play whether or not they are intended.

Goffman's observation that in the public realm of complex urban societies, strangers are impelled to acknowledge and ritually affirm each other's selves is clearly relevant to this distinction between parochial and public spaces. As a norm of the public realm, a certain interactional trust is created between strangers in public places as they extend rituals of respect for strangers. According to Goffman, even strangers who are very different from each other participate in these ritual acts of deference. Through interaction rituals they mutually acknowledge the sacredness of the selves presented to the public through impression management. In the world of strangers, selves that are

quite separate and different are politely acknowledged as people contribute, through these rituals, to the maintenance of a balanced urban social order.

Goffman's ritual deference is displayed between lesbians in public places in the same way that it is in the general population. However, as I have shown in detailing lesbian interaction rituals, shared marginal status allows for an adjustment in norms of civil inattention and sometimes provides an opening for more spontaneous engagement. Lesbians are more likely to be attentive to each other, provided the situation is conducive, because they are motivated to extend solidarity to each other in a homophobic society.

For this reason, lesbian strangers often take ritual deference a step further in creating solidary responsiveness. Since securing interactional trust is imperative for a marginalized group that faces risks in the public realm, lesbians who encounter each other can extend displays of trust beyond the routine trust established between strangers. The trust secured between lesbians is no longer simply about securing and displaying trust for fellow human beings in a general sense, but becomes specifically about trusting each other to honour and protect a stigmatized identity. These engagements, however, do not disrupt the respect for anonymity and privacy that is so important for urbanites (Jacobs, 1961).

Whether public social interaction stops at ritual acknowledgment or becomes spontaneous engagement, the norms of the public realm are followed by lesbians as they encounter each other in public places. As interaction is based on norms of impersonality, selves can be acknowledged regardless of differences. Once in the relatively "safe" space of lesbian groups, however, where it is assumed that all are

lesbians, differences become more visible. In lesbian spaces, then, exclusionary dynamics may become more apparent as “*sense of safety and connection*” is created “*on a more sustained level.*”

I have also suggested that public realm interaction can contain seeds of exclusionary dynamics. This tendency was made clear repeatedly as lesbians expressed disappointment when they were not acknowledged by other lesbians in public places. Lyn Lofland (1990) points out that inequality is created in non-intimate sociality in the same way that solidarity is. Consider the following comment by Gardener (1997: 324).

Belying the U.S. middle-class ideal of an egalitarian etiquette for public places (Goffman, 1963, 1971), analysis of actual contact shows that public places are dotted with contacts that evince judgements of status and discrimination no less finely tuned and expressive than those evinced in private regions.

In order to explore the possibility that lesbians engage in finely tuned discriminatory practices in public, it is necessary to look beyond moments of connection to those moments when lesbians do not connect. In undertaking this exploration, I will make the assumption, not often recognized in the literature, that behaviour in public spaces and behaviour in parochial spaces are linked. In other words, there is a connection between the way we treat strangers and the way we treat acquaintances and intimates.

Many participants described instances when they felt that they had been ignored or avoided by strangers they perceived as lesbian. I referred to this interactional phenomenon as “studious non-acknowledgement”. Studied non-observance is different from but related to “gaydar overlooks” which describe being passed by on the gaydar. Being ignored or not noticed can cause as much feelings of isolation as connecting can

cause feelings of solidarity. One participant related a scenario about a non-connection that she claims made her reflect on the issue of lesbian connections.

*When [my partner] and I lived on Ruby Street, we were by no means the only dykes on our block. There were at least two or three others, plus an obviously gay man just down the block from us. We did not hide that we were lovers. While we were never obnoxious, I wouldn't hesitate to kiss her on the street or call her endearing names while gardening...that sort of thing. Opposite us in a big old 2-storey house lived two women, we called them "The Girls." I swore they were dykes. They looked alike, short hair, wore pants or shorts...the point is the four of us never exchanged hellos, goodbyes--anything. Never any connection, despite what could have been easily assumed was a shared sexual identity. The neighbours on the other side (a husband and wife, we called "The Chubbies" for their body size/shape) did talk to us, about gardening, bird watching.*

(41 year old corporate director, Winnipeg)

This story raises significant questions around the meanings of those non-connective moments that occur between lesbians in the public realm. As the participant above remarks:

*What does this mean? I don't know, other than there are as many moments of NON-connection as there may be of connection between us for varied and endless reasons. Given the possibility of NON-connections, those times when we DO connect with each other are precious and empowering. Recognizing each other as "the same" in a world where we are more usually described as "different" is rich and wonderful. It is worth laughing in delight about and celebrating.*

(41 year old corporate director, Winnipeg)

In discussing the concept of non-connection, I will introduce the concept of "selective engagement." This phenomenon suggests that people in public places are more open to those they perceive to be similar to themselves. Do lesbians assess other lesbians they encounter in public on the basis of similarities to themselves? If they feel that they do acknowledge lesbian strangers, regardless of differences, are they more open to a prolonged encounter when the stranger is perceived as similar? And, how do

these tendencies of selective engagement, played out so subtly in public places, affect the ways lesbians interact in less anonymous settings?<sup>57</sup>

The study revealed a contradictory set of viewpoints about the phenomenon of selective engagement. These seemingly contradictory views; that lesbians selectively engage with strangers and that lesbians acknowledge each other regardless of differences have been addressed throughout this dissertation as I have explored both solidarity and exclusion. It has become evident through the exploration of gaydar cues, stereotypes, outness and situational factors, that lesbian public realm interaction is indeed a complex issue. Most of the participants felt that they acknowledged any woman they read as lesbian. They felt that, free from the pressures towards conformity of lesbian groups, lesbians experience a sense of connection to lesbian strangers, regardless of other identity factors. The following remark sums up this notion.

*I think issues (especially race!) divide lesbian communities, just as they divide our entire society...world. I feel, from experience, that there are some cues that transcend these divisions- a certain energy that some lesbians have regardless of their racial, socio-economic background and these are recognizable, I think that lesbians often see "lesbian" before difference in each other- at least in public but, within lesbians spaces, these divisions do come back into play. (25 year old student and receptionist, New York City)*

Without looking deeply into the situation of public realm connections and non-connections, it might be tempting to assume that lesbians regard all lesbians equally in public places. However, I think a more in-depth and reflective look at the social actions of lesbians in public places might suggest otherwise. Several respondents indicated that lesbians were more likely to notice and acknowledge lesbians who were like themselves in terms of age, politics, race and social class. At least they were more open to an encounter with those lesbians from similar backgrounds.

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<sup>57</sup> These, of course, are all questions that require systematic investigation in less exploratory research.

*I am deeply disappointed at NOT being acknowledged by women on the streets after I have made an effort to acknowledge them. The cliques in this community (every community) separate and alienate us. A lawyer or judge would probably not look my way (even knowing by appearance that I'm lesbian) as I am working class. I just don't understand being ignored.*

(46 year old postal worker and massage therapist, Winnipeg)

In the interpretation of this working class lesbian, class is relevant in determining how strangers treat each other. Perhaps a similar sentiment will be expressed by other lesbians who are outside the norm in the dominant (i.e., white middle class) lesbian subculture. For example, one participant felt that younger lesbians rarely acknowledged her because she “*looks like their mothers*” (48 year old social worker, Australia). She had often been harassed in lesbian groups because of her choice of a more femme identity and the fact that she had sons. She felt a similar exclusion in the public world as lesbians who did not approve of her appearance ignored her even when they had read her lesbian identity. In fact, gender presentation was commonly cited in the study as an issue in public realm exclusion. Lesbians who look more feminine and thus less stereotypically gay often feel that other lesbians do not extend solidarity. Other participants claimed that more closeted (or mainstream) lesbians often refused to extend solidarity to lesbians who were more clearly butch or radical looking even when it was clear that there had been a moment of recognition.

*I am femme. It used to anger me that I was invisible to other lesbians based on the way I choose to present my gender. Even if I am read as lesbian, I am not valued as much as butch/masculine lesbians. An example is when I was at the National Gay Lesbian/TransgenderFoundation Conference with my girlfriend (butch). Lesbians would constantly say hello to her while never acknowledging me.*

(23 year old graduate student, Mankato, Minnesota)

If lesbians acknowledge some types of lesbians more readily than others, are they sending a subtle message that certain social identities are more acceptable in the lesbian community? Analysis of a concern that has recently received attention in the lesbian

community (race) will prove revealing. Lesbians of colour have pointed out that non-white women often feel marginalized in many lesbian spaces (Lorde, 1987). With respect to the example of the Lesbian Avengers group discussed earlier, an important question is raised: If the black women entering a room full of white women in a political situation feel alienated, can we assume they feel similarly in anonymous public places when encountering white lesbians? Several participants said that they read white lesbians more easily than non-white lesbians. It follows that these white lesbians do not become socially responsive to black lesbians if they have not read their lesbian identity. Is this confusion over reading women of colour based on racist tendencies and a propensity to rely uncritically on stereotypes? Does this sometimes unconscious public realm exclusion lead to the construction of a racist mentality that is carried into the groups that lesbians form?

In my study issues of race were raised mainly from a white perspective but the reflections on race and interaction were nevertheless instructive. One participant made the following, seemingly simple but highly revealing, comment about her experiences.

*Because I am white and my partner is a person of colour we have been assumed to have a mother-nanny/caregiver relationship by both gay and straight strangers.*  
(40 year old home based consultant, Ottawa).

If white lesbians direct their social responsiveness mainly towards white lesbians, then these fleeting exclusionary actions are part of the way the community becomes dominated by a white norm. In the statement above, even gay people interpreted the mixed race relationship as nanny/caregiver. If the lesbian parents were both white they would more likely have been recognized as a lesbian couple and treated accordingly. These minute public realm interpretations, and the interactions based on them, mean

that this couple will be excluded from any mutual instances of solidary responsiveness based on the fact that their relationship as a couple is overlooked by many lesbians. The question that will necessitate exploration is obvious: how do our stereotypes and resulting assumptions (around race for example) structure the way we treat other lesbians in terms of both recognition and acknowledgment?

If the theory of structuration is accurate and the rituals enacted in public help create social structure, then it becomes clear why women of colour find the predominantly white lesbian community exclusive. It also explains why racism in lesbian communities cannot be eradicated simply by changing the structure of lesbian groups (e.g., introducing policies of revolving leadership) or by trying to include more women of colour in white lesbian groups. Confronting the way we structure intimate relationships will not resolve the way we structure non-intimate ones. Focusing on stranger interaction between lesbians, then, suggests a new approach to subcultural dynamics such as racism. This approach recognizes a need to reflect deeply on our public realm interaction. No amount of social action in political groups will create a less exclusive lesbian community if subtle differential treatment of strangers (selective engagement) based on "othering tendencies" (i.e., treating the other as "not one of us") is continued.

### **3. Reflecting on Public Realm Social Interaction**

In discussing ways to "escape the tyranny of society," Peter Berger (1963) offers an insightful concept: "ecstasy." Ecstasy refers to the process of becoming aware of those thought processes that exist below the level of consciousness and the way social

action is based on those thoughts. In an ecstatic state, social actors step outside of the taken-for-granted routines of society such that "givenness becomes possibility." Becoming aware of the ways in which we interact with strangers, I suggest, will offer one such situation where the givenness of social structure (e.g., stereotypes and rituals) becomes the possibility of a more inclusive creation of non-intimate social solidarity.

To begin to grasp the ways that both exclusion and solidarity are created, lesbians must reflect on our own non-intimate social interactions, starting with the smallest and most unconscious ones. These are the actions rarely thought about because they happen so automatically, often when we are alone in the public world engaging in the most mundane and trivial day-to-day activities. Participants often made comments at the end of their survey, by e-mail or verbally, suggesting that engaging in a study such as this one was extremely difficult. Two reasons for this difficulty became evident. First, it forced them to think about the types of interaction that they take for granted and delving into unconscious and habitual actions is never an easy process. Secondly, the survey questions forced them to think about ways they treat other lesbians. In doing so, it made them more aware of some of the exclusionary tendencies inherent in their own interactional patterns in public places.

The treatment of strangers involves choices, whether or not we are conscious of making those choices and whether we are aware of the stereotypes, ideologies and beliefs from which those choices stem. I cannot overstate the importance of confronting the reality of stereotyping. Lesbians in my study often espoused the rhetoric of eschewing stereotypes but nevertheless relied on them heavily in their interactions with lesbian strangers. This situation is not unusual. The generalities employed by people

tend to exaggerate those qualities in other people that are most relevant to them. Most participants mentioned feeling victimized by stereotypes at some point. The dual nature of stereotypes as both constraining and enabling must be addressed instead of merely dismissing stereotypes as necessarily negative. While, it has become popular to condemn the process of stereotyping as the basis of prejudice and exclusionary dynamics, this view is not entirely useful because it does not acknowledge the uses of stereotypes in all social interaction. Almost 30 years ago McCall and Simmons (1966: 114-115) made the following point which warrants reiteration.

The popular condemnation of all prejudgements and stereotyped thinking is facile and unrealistic. All living creatures, it seems, must employ stereotypes to categorize and deal with the kaleidoscopic flow of events around them. Nor can they wait contemplatively until all the facts are in: they must prejudge the meaning of the whole on the basis of a few signs and must act on this jot of knowledge...In light of this perspective, stereotyping involves not merely the attitudes of rigid people...It is an inherent and inevitable aspect of every human appraisal and every person encountered.

Nowhere is this human propensity for prejudgement more evident than in the public realm where, as Goffman has pointed out, most of the crucial facts about individuals "lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed within it" (1959:2). Furthermore, in fleeting engagements there is rarely the time available for "eating the pudding that the proof can be found in" (1959: 2). If, as Goffman and other interactionists insist, we cannot simply wish stereotypes away by condemning them, then the most realistic approach is to become as conscious as possible of the way we employ stereotypes and how, in turn, these "enabling conventions" (Goffman, 1971) influence our behaviour.

Awareness is the first step in changing behaviour. Becoming more vigilant of the habitual thoughts that guide our actions will lead to enhanced critical reflection on the effect these patterns have had on our own lives and the lives of the people with whom we come in contact with. This reflexivity is an important, yet undervalued, tool of social change. Consider the following critical reflections offered by participants. These thoughts demonstrate the manner in which the survey sparked thinking about stereotyping.

*Maybe you need to check out all of these questions with ethnically diverse lesbians around cues/meeting people/acknowledgement. There may be more issues coming up around shame, embarrassment or secrecy also with differently abled people—often their sexuality is overlooked in general (straight or gay) because they are seen as asexual.*

(26 year old social services worker, Winnipeg)

*I am very interested in who doesn't get read as a lesbian and why. I suspect that an analysis of race, class and disability would be important here. How does what we think we know (a lesbian looks like X) affect those people who do not look like X? How does this exclude people? How does this exclude people who are already otherwise marginalized? What does this say about lesbian "communities"? How might this affect who can say and be and do?*

(28 year old PhD Student and TA., Toronto)

*I wonder if dykes of colour have the same visibility issues as white dykes. For example, it's common knowledge that the black and Latino communities are largely homophobic. Perhaps dykes of colour have different ways of operating in public and visibility has different connotations, simply from having to negotiate three minority traits (queer, female, color). Just a thought, but the answer needs to come from dykes of color.*

(44 year old student and bartender, New York City)

*It is probably easier to identify white middle class lesbians because most are probably lesbians before anything else. A black woman is black first ya know. A lot of people are probably oppressed enough that they're not interested in appearing more vulnerable, whether that's conscious or not. For a black woman to be a visible lesbian is probably alienation to her identity as a black woman in the black community. I don't know, I am a white middle class dyke.*

(28 year old convenience store assistant, Winnipeg)

*When the school year begins and my department holds their orientation, I have realized that I always visit with and introduce myself to the other shorthaired white females. I am now trying to counteract this by speaking to anyone nearby. My first reaction however seems to lean towards seeking out the women who fit the "lesbian codes."*

(28 year old PhD student and TA, Toronto)

Becoming conscious of the way we operate in public places will mean embracing the challenge of dramaturgical awareness. This dramaturgical awareness must begin with a critical reflection on the minute processes of categorization I have detailed in this study (i.e., gaydar) and build up to analytical inspection of the ways we manage more prolonged encounters with strangers in public places.

What are some of the strategies we can use to increase this awareness? If we look back to the discussion on strategic outness we get some clues. Being visible to each other as lesbians in public creates a sense of political strength. Seeing other lesbians often imbues lesbians with a sense of power. This feeling of power is infectious and thus encourages lesbians to be more visible. Now I would like to take this argument a step farther and argue that choosing lesbian visibility serves as a bridge between differing social identities. This bridging has the potential to dissolve some of the negative power of stereotypes. Consider the following comment from a very visible lesbian. I had asked whether it is easier to recognize lesbians from certain subcultures based on race, class and political identities.

*Oh yeah, good question to remind me of my white middle class lesbian existence. Basically I find it harder to recognize older women and black women. Asian women can be difficult for me to peg as well as short dykey haircuts are common. Usually though because I'm so dykey I find these women making eye contact with me. Catching my eye and letting me know they are there. (37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)*

The participant begins by suggesting that some women are harder to read from her own white middle class perspective. This was a common comment in the survey data. She is willing, however, to work with her stereotypical tendencies. Her own lesbian visibility allows her a unique opportunity. Being visible as a lesbian, she finds that she is often the target of other women's gaydar. By being visible in public she puts herself

in a position which enables her to receive the types of rituals and interactional strategies discussed in this study. By being visible (and interactionally astute) she is learning to pick up the identity cues of lesbians who do not fit the norms of her middle class lesbian subculture. Her insights stress the power of minute and routine interaction, forcefully demonstrating the links between the concepts of ritual recognition, strategies of acknowledgment, outness and solidarity.

*I suppose that lesbians who are harder to spot have to make themselves known in different ways. Eye contact and facial expressions would carry even more weight. This happens a lot though. Often while walking I get the look from women I never would have pegged. This diversity of our community makes the whole contact thing so much more exciting.*  
(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

In this passage is revealed the potential inherent in becoming conscious of unconscious thoughts and actions (i.e., becoming "ecstatic"). I do not suggest that all lesbians must become conspicuous (i.e., stereotypical in appearance). Being visible is not solely an appearential phenomenon. Rather, I suggest that as lesbians begin to reflect critically on the treatment of strangers, a clearer understanding of the subtle signs sent from a diverse range of lesbians will be gained. As lesbians become more aware of cues and signals received from diverse strangers, there will necessarily be an increased vigilance toward the types of cues and signals sent to strangers. Becoming dramaturgically aware of interaction with other lesbians is an important tool in the goal of creating a more inclusive community. My hope is that, in devising a research strategy that asks lesbians to engage in this process of critical reflection, I have furthered that important goal and taken a step in the direction towards a more reflective community.

### **Conclusions: The Uses of Strangers and The Urban Public Realm**

Urban sociologists from the symbolic interactionist perspective have long touted the uses of stranger interaction in the public realm. Recently, scholars have warned that in the modern urban world there is a highly dangerous drive towards the privatization and sanitization of public space (Lofland, 1998). A growing anti-urban ideology has threatened the types of urban public spaces that engender spontaneous social engagement between selves that do not know each other intimately. In personal relationships it is natural to express an impulse towards intimate knowing. Intimate knowing is an end in itself and highly satisfying. But while solidarity relationships found in private and parochial realms are crucial human associations, the significance of non-intimate solidarity responsiveness cannot be underestimated.

By overlooking the moral component of stranger-to-stranger engagement, sociologists miss a key ingredient in the creation of identity, collective sentiments and social structure. By undertaking an extensive study of strangers in the public realm, I have endeavoured to bring to light the meanings behind what appear to be trivial interaction rituals. By doing so, I want to contribute empirically to the cautionary stance against a dismissal of the significance of strangers and the urban public realm. While anonymous and fleeting interaction between strangers is interesting in its own right, it is also pivotal to the development of mature selves able to deal with diversity and urban unpredictability.

A close look at lesbian interaction rituals has shown that solidarity is not merely about warm feelings created by intimates in "communities" and in primary groups. Nor is it about predictability, sameness, and lack of conflict. On the contrary, in diverse

and apparently chaotic urban spaces, selves who are very different from each other can show a form of civility and human bonding that is different from, but as important as more intimate forms of human bonding.<sup>58</sup>

City life is the being together of strangers...In the city strangers live side by side in public places, giving to and receiving from one another social and aesthetic products, often mediated by a huge chain of social interactions. In public places, people are aware of each other's presence and sometimes attend to it. The social differentiation of the city also provides a positive inexhaustibility of human relations. The possibility always exists of becoming acquainted with new and different people, with different cultural and social experiences. (Young: 1990: 318-319)

Being on "sidewalk terms" with strangers, then, is both individually rewarding and collectively indispensable. Through fleeting sidewalk contacts, lesbians create solidary responsiveness. The element of solidarity produced between lesbians is perhaps most evident in the emotions conjured up by these often fleeting encounters.

*I feel affirmed, energized and empowered and proud of myself and the lesbians I encounter. It makes me feel like I'm not alone in the world, and that I am okay.*

(26 year old student and student affairs administrator, Mankato, Minnesota)

*I get thrilled to see lesbians everywhere and will work to connect with them in some manner. There is definitely a feeling I get when I discover another lesbian. It's so damn exciting!*

(37 year old radio technician/producer, Toronto)

*Seeing a queer person in a crowd of strangers is like seeing a friend, even if we don't connect, I feel comforted and less alone.*

(25 year old student and receptionist New York City)

Being on sidewalk terms with strangers is individually rewarding and collectively indispensable. As a participant observer, I felt the effects of these engagements many times. Lesbians I approached often expressed pleasure at being part of the study and

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<sup>58</sup>A volume of *Research in Community Sociology* edited Spencer Cahill and Lyn Lofland (1994) is dedicated empirically and theoretically to the notion that community is not just about primary bonds between intimate and acquaintances and that more fleeting relationships also create "community" between strangers. This volume is aptly titled "The Community of the Streets."

informed me that they felt proud to be spotted and approached by a lesbian on the street.

The following comment is from a New Yorker I met in a public space.

*We have the deepest appreciation of beautiful OUT lesbians who are doing something, taking action, making an attempt to figure out what the hell us crazy dykes are all about! It's so great and the inspiration spreads throughout the community and hits so many facets of our lives. It makes me proud to be "part of the family"...*

(21 year old coffee shop employee, New York City)

If actions of solidarity among lesbian strangers have a ripple effect on "*many facets*" of the community, it is logical to conclude that small-scale exclusions between lesbians and the feelings of isolation created by these actions have similar repercussions. "Non-solidarity" is also created at street level, contributing to individual level alienation, subcultural conflict and the marginalization of lesbians who do not fit the norms of the lesbian community.

As an exploratory study, this dissertation covered a lot of ground. The study has shown the huge amount of interactional labour (Goffman, 1959) engaged in by the lesbian subculture as it negotiates trust, security, identity validation and celebration of lesbian identity in the public realm. Those small-scale episodes provided insight into much larger concerns. The results of this in-depth study of interaction between lesbians in public spaces, then, have generated ideas which contain exciting theoretical and methodological potential extending beyond the lesbian subculture. I focused on one urban subculture (lesbians) and one slice of that subculture (predominantly white North American lesbian subculture). I want to suggest, however, that there is indication that the application this approach to other subcultures will prove enlightening.

Like any exploratory study this research raised as many questions as it answered. Due to the methodological limitations of a study of this size, I have been able to offer

only theoretical speculation. Further research must investigate more systemically the specific manners in which these dynamics are played out in the public realm and how this public realm interaction is reflected in more deliberate collective settings. Furthermore, in order to help create a more conscious society, more detailed work must investigate the assumptions urbanites use in categorizing each other, how these categorizing processes are acquired, how they can best be challenged and how we can liberate ourselves from the entanglement of stereotypical thinking.

Many of the insights arising from this research owe their existence to the type of interactive dialogue I have worked to inspire between lesbians; strangers, acquaintances and friends. I have drawn on the experiences of a marginalized subculture because “underdogs” (Lofland, 1976) have an edge on critical reflection and because their public actions are more dramaturgically strategic. As an insider to this subculture, I have been privy to the passion for knowledge about their subculture that lesbians possess and tapping into this passion has made the research very exciting. I anticipate that this work may encourage others to continue this dialogue, to think about interaction between strangers in urban public places or to pursue empirically some of the questions raised.

The rituals occurring in the public realm provide a window into the soul of society (Cahill, 1994; Lofland, 1990; Goffman, 1971). By studying the collective symbolization of identity and the building of solidarity that takes place among lesbians in the public realm, I have been privileged to obtain a glimpse into that collective soul. If this dissertation has added to our growing awareness of the fascinating world of strangers, then it has served its purpose.

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Appendix 1

PROJECT TITLE AND LIST OF INVESTIGATORS

Project Title: Lesbian Interactions in the Public Realm

Principal Investigator(s)

Name	Address	Telephone
Tracy Nielsen	179 Lipton st. WP9 MB.	(204)-772-4065

Status (circle): Faculty Post-Doctoral  Graduate Student  Undergraduate Student

Student Researchers:

Course Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Instructor: \_\_\_\_\_

Thesis/Dissertation:  Signature of Advisor: Dan Albas

**FOR RERC USE ONLY**

Date received Aug 17/2000 Reviewers: W. Taylor B. Payne

This Proposal, as currently described, has been:

- approved as submitted;
- approved with suggestions for minor changes (no re-submission required);
- approved with conditions (that must be met before final approval is granted);
- deferred, pending receipt of additional information or major revisions
- not approved.

Aug 23/00  
Date

[Signature]  
Reviewer's signature

Reviewers: If changes are required, please provide details on separate pages.

Proposal Review Report sent on Aug 31/2000

Initials gls

## Appendix 2

### A Study of Lesbian Interactions in the Public Realm Participant Consent Form

I have read the attached information sheet on the study, I, (print name) \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in "A Study of Lesbian Interactions in the Public Realm".

I understand that if I agree to participate my questionnaire will be analyzed for the purposes of the study. I also understand that confidentiality is guaranteed and that my name and identity will not be revealed at any point in the research process.

I understand that participation in this research process is entirely voluntary and that I am free to refuse to answer any questions. I realize that I am free to withdraw from the study without consequences. If requested, I will have access to a summary of the findings.

I am aware that any questions I have can be directed to the study investigator, Tracy Nielsen, or the Ph.D. advisor, Dr. Daniel Albas. I understand that this research has been approved by the Department of Sociology Research Committee and that any questions I may have with regard to the ethical procedures may be directed to the Head of the Department of Sociology (204) 474-9260 for referral to the Research Ethics Review Committee.

Having reviewed the statements above, I agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant's Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Researcher's Signature)

Principal Investigator: Tracy Nielsen (204) 772-4065

E-mail: [umniels3@cc.Umanitoba.CA](mailto:umniels3@cc.Umanitoba.CA)

Advisor: Dr. Daniel Albas

Head of Sociology Department: Dr. Rodney Kueneman (204) 474-9260

### Appendix 3

Department of Sociology  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg Manitoba R3T 2N2

#### **A Study of Lesbian Interactions in the Public Realm Information Letter for Participants**

My name is Tracy Nielsen. I am a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Manitoba. This study, on lesbians in public places, is being conducted as a Ph.D. dissertation in the sociology department at the University of Manitoba. I am the principal investigator and the only one who will have access to the confidential data. My advisor's name is Dr. Daniel Albas. He can be contacted at the University of Manitoba (204) 474-9389.

With permission of the participants, the questionnaires will be analyzed and interpreted. The goal is to create concepts that lesbians can identify with in terms of their experiences in the public realm. I am interested in the range and diversity of lesbian experiences. All efforts will be made to ensure that the conclusions accurately reflect the experiences of the participants.

Participant confidentiality will be ensured. No names will be used in discussing the work, writing the report or in any oral report. However, with permission of the respondents, I will anonymously quote participants in the thesis. This is standard form in academic research of this type and is an excellent way to illustrate the experiences of the participants. Questionnaires will be stored in a safe place. That is, they will be locked in a filing cabinet and destroyed at the completion of the project.

I appreciate your taking the time to participate in this study. By participating you are contributing to the creation of knowledge about a topic that has not yet been explored in detail. I anticipate that the research will illuminate the situation of stranger encounters between lesbians but I also want to shed light on the role of the public realm generally and interactions within it. A summary of the final report will be available at the conclusion of the research.

The Department of Sociology Research Ethics Review Committee has approved this research.

Principal investigator: Tracy Nielsen (Ph.D. Candidate)  
Phone: (204) 772-4065  
e-mail: umniels3@cc.Umanitoba.CA  
Advisor: Dr. Daniel Albas (Professor of Sociology) (204) 474-9389

## Appendix 4

**ATTENTION LESBIANS:**

I am a Canadian Sociologist doing a Ph.D. on "Lesbians in the Public Realm". If you are a lesbian who is "out" on the streets and wants to talk about it, I WANT YOU! It is time to talk about lesbians in public places and spaces.

Please e-mail me at **Umniels3@cc.Umanitoba.ca** for more information on this exciting research. Confidential questionnaires are available both on line and in hard copy and I will be interviewing in New York later this year.



## Appendix 5

### A Study of Lesbian Interaction in the Public Realm

This survey will be analyzed for the purposes of studying lesbians and public spaces. I am looking for both diverse and common experiences. These questions are meant as guidelines. Feel free to skip or add questions. I am not trying to prove a theory, only to explore your experiences in public spaces, thus I value anything you have to say about the topic.

#### **Part One: Demographic questions and respondent profile:**

This first set of questions is intended to give me a sense of the women taking part in the study.

1. What is your age?
2. Briefly describe your current living situation.
3. How would you describe your ethnic identity or status?
4. What is your current occupation or where do you work?
5. Briefly describe your educational background.
6. What is the average yearly income of your household? What social class do you see yourself as coming from (or belonging to)?

#### **Part 2: Lesbian identity**

These next questions address the topic of lesbian identity. Please note that I use lesbian out of convenience. If you prefer gay, queer or dyke (or any other term) feel free to use it. I am trying to get a sense of how participants define their sexual identity and how "out" they are in different areas of their lives. (By "out", I mean being open about lesbian/gay sexual identity.)

1. How would you describe your sexual identity or orientation (e.g., gay, lesbian, two-spirited, dyke, queer bisexual)?
2. Why do you choose this label?

3. On a scale of 1-5 (1 is "rarely out" and 5 is "always out") how would you rate yourself in terms of "outness" generally?

4. Using the same scale, describe your "outness" in the following areas of your life:

a. Family and other kinship groups

b. Neighbourhood of residence

c. Workplace (or university, school, volunteer association)

d. General public places (e.g., stores, sidewalks, public parks)

e. Lesbian and gay positive places (e.g., pubs, bookstores, coffee shops).

### **Part 3: Social Interactions in Public Places**

These next questions are designed to stimulate your thinking about the study topic. I am looking for the subtle ways that lesbians make connections with each other in public. In other words, how do lesbians, who are strangers to each other, read and respond to each other in public places. Are there any lesbian-specific rituals and customs? Be aware that there is little systematic research on lesbians in public, while the literature on gay men is quite extensive. Anything you can tell me about your public realm experiences will be useful!

This study is asking you to describe experiences that are subtle and taken-for-granted. You may need to reflect on the questions. I suggest you read them over and take your time answering them. In the normal course of living (or perhaps discussing the questions with others) you may find more ideas coming to mind.

1. In public places, do you think you can recognize women who are lesbians? In other words, do you think you have what the gay subculture refers to as "gaydar"?

2. If you think you can tell when women are lesbians, what are some of the “cues” or “signs” you use in reading their sexual identity? (I have broken the cues down into three areas).

a. Appearance cues (e.g., hair, clothes etc...)

b) Behavioural cues (e.g., body language or what they are doing)

c) Spatial cues (e.g., location)

3. Do you think that you display a lesbian identity in public? If so, what are the attributes that allow other lesbians to “read” your identity as a lesbian?

4. Is being recognized as a lesbian (or not) by other lesbians a choice you make? That is, do you think you consciously design your appearance, mannerisms etc... to emphasize or conceal your sexual identity?

5. What percentage of the time (roughly) do you think other lesbians identify you as a lesbian?

6. What are some of the signals you receive from strangers that lead you to believe that you have been read as queer/lesbian/dyke/gay as opposed to heterosexual? Or, how can you tell if your sexual identity has been overlooked?

7. I am interested in the way we misread each other's cues and signals. Are there instances when you wanted to be seen as a lesbian but were not? Can you describe one such situation?

8. The "lesbian community", in general, is quite diverse. Do you think it is easier to recognize lesbians from certain subcultures/races/social classes/styles, political groups etc.?

9. If certain "types" of lesbians are easier to spot, what are some of the implications for those lesbians who are not as easy to "tag" as dykes (e.g., those who fit the stereotype less well)?

10. In public places, when you encounter women that you think are gay, what is your most frequent reaction?

11. How do you think the majority of lesbians react or respond to "spotting" another dyke in public? That is, if you think there is a standard lesbian reaction to "gaydar," what would it be?

12. Does your reaction to lesbians in public places vary by situation and context? If so, can you describe a type of situation, or environment, that encourages interaction between lesbians and one that does not?

13. In this last question of the section, I encourage you to think (and write) about a situation in which you had contact with a stranger (or strangers) based on the assumption of shared sexual identity (e.g., as gay/ queer/lesbian). Please describe the situation paying attention to details, if you remember them. In the passage below, I provide a scenario from my own experiences to give you an example. This is a very minute episode of interaction and I could also analyze the many instances of connections of longer duration with lesbian strangers.

Once in New York City, my partner and I were walking, holding hands, down a busy East Village sidewalk. We passed a couple of lesbians. All four of us exchanged quick (knowing) glances, but the more femme looking of the couple held my gaze for a prolonged moment and smiled. I remarked, jokingly, to my partner that she must have liked me. A few seconds after we passed each other, we all turned our heads to look back at each other. Being caught in the act of obvious recognition was both exhilarating and a bit embarrassing. To break the ice (or cement the connection), my partner called out "Hey, she's mine". We all laughed and then kept on our way. This passing exchange, so minute that most people on the street would not notice it, created a surge of validation for four lesbians on a New York City sidewalk. In a world surrounded by heterosexual norms, complete strangers shared a moment of "queer pride". In analyzing this story for the purposes of the study I would think about how we recognized the lesbians, how, how we created the solidarity and how it made us feel. What was it about the space that prompted the interaction? What was it about the women's appearances that impelled us to read them as lesbian? What was it about their behaviour? Breaking down any encounter you can recall in terms of these types of descriptions is what I am asking you to do.

(Please write on the back of paper if more space is required).

**Part 4: Urban Spaces**

In this last section, I am interested in your observations about the characteristics of public spaces that have taken on lesbian-specific meaning in your city. Again, sociological knowledge on gay men and their public spaces is much more extensive than the literature on lesbian "territories." Thus any thoughts or observations that you contribute will be helpful in developing theories about lesbians and urban spaces.

1. It has been noted by sociologists that subcultures often create "home territories" as an act of resistance and in building community. Are there any spaces in your city that have taken on special meaning for lesbians?

2. Are there any neighbourhoods in your city where large numbers of lesbians live? If so, please describe this neighbourhood and why you think lesbians are attracted to it.

3. Do you think there are differences between the types of neighbourhoods that gay men and lesbians live in in cities? Similarities?

4. In terms of "diversity", can you think of any concerns around race/class/age and other differences with respect to the spaces we create/use in cities? For example, are some lesbian spaces primarily occupied by certain subcultures in the larger lesbian "community"?

5. If you have any further thoughts on this topic or questions you might like to ask, please put them in this last section. In asking these questions, I may have overlooked crucial issues around lesbian identity, diversity, conflict and urban spaces. (Use the back of page if required.)

I want to thank you for participating in this important study. Your contribution is extremely valuable to me and I am certain that the creation of knowledge about lesbian topics is an empowering process. If you have any further thoughts on the topic do not hesitate to email or phone me. I will be gathering data on the topic until spring of 2001 but you can contact me anytime as this type of research is an ongoing and interactive process. All personal information will be kept anonymous and confidentiality is strictly guaranteed.







## Appendix 5

### A Study of Lesbian Interaction in the Public Realm

This survey will be analyzed for the purposes of studying lesbians and public spaces. I am looking for both diverse and common experiences. These questions are meant as guidelines. Feel free to skip or add questions. I am not trying to prove a theory, only to explore your experiences in public spaces, thus I value anything you have to say about the topic.

#### **Part One: Demographic questions and respondent profile:**

This first set of questions is intended to give me a sense of the women taking part in the study.

1. What is your age?
2. Briefly describe your current living situation.
3. How would you describe your ethnic identity or status?
4. What is your current occupation or where do you work?
5. Briefly describe your educational background.
6. What is the average yearly income of your household? What social class do you see yourself as coming from (or belonging to)?

#### **Part 2: Lesbian identity**

These next questions address the topic of lesbian identity. Please note that I use lesbian out of convenience. If you prefer gay, queer or dyke (or any other term) feel free to use it. I am trying to get a sense of how participants define their sexual identity and how "out" they are in different areas of their lives. (By "out", I mean being open about lesbian/gay sexual identity.)

1. How would you describe your sexual identity or orientation (e.g., gay, lesbian, two-spirited, dyke, queer bisexual)?
2. Why do you choose this label?

3. On a scale of 1-5 (1 is "rarely out" and 5 is "always out") how would you rate yourself in terms of "outness" generally?

4. Using the same scale, describe your "outness" in the following areas of your life:

a. Family and other kinship groups

b. Neighbourhood of residence

c. Workplace (or university, school, volunteer association)

d. General public places (e.g., stores, sidewalks, public parks)

e. Lesbian and gay positive places (e.g., pubs, bookstores, coffee shops).

### **Part 3: Social Interactions in Public Places**

These next questions are designed to stimulate your thinking about the study topic. I am looking for the subtle ways that lesbians make connections with each other in public. In other words, how do lesbians, who are strangers to each other, read and respond to each other in public places. Are there any lesbian-specific rituals and customs? Be aware that there is little systematic research on lesbians in public, while the literature on gay men is quite extensive. Anything you can tell me about your public realm experiences will be useful!

This study is asking you to describe experiences that are subtle and taken-for-granted. You may need to reflect on the questions. I suggest you read them over and take your time answering them. In the normal course of living (or perhaps discussing the questions with others) you may find more ideas coming to mind.

1. In public places, do you think you can recognize women who are lesbians? In other words, do you think you have what the gay subculture refers to as "gaydar"?

2. If you think you can tell when women are lesbians, what are some of the “cues” or “signs” you use in reading their sexual identity? (I have broken the cues down into three areas).

a. Appearance cues (e.g., hair, clothes etc...)

b) Behavioural cues (e.g., body language or what they are doing)

c) Spatial cues (e.g., location)

3. Do you think that you display a lesbian identity in public? If so, what are the attributes that allow other lesbians to “read” your identity as a lesbian?

4. Is being recognized as a lesbian (or not) by other lesbians a choice you make? That is, do you think you consciously design your appearance, mannerisms etc... to emphasize or conceal your sexual identity?

5. What percentage of the time (roughly) do you think other lesbians identify you as a lesbian?

6. What are some of the signals you receive from strangers that lead you to believe that you have been read as queer/lesbian/dyke/gay as opposed to heterosexual? Or, how can you tell if your sexual identity has been overlooked?

7. I am interested in the way we misread each other's cues and signals. Are there instances when you wanted to be seen as a lesbian but were not? Can you describe one such situation?

8. The "lesbian community", in general, is quite diverse. Do you think it is easier to recognize lesbians from certain subcultures/races/social classes/styles, political groups etc.?

9. If certain "types" of lesbians are easier to spot, what are some of the implications for those lesbians who are not as easy to "tag" as dykes (e.g., those who fit the stereotype less well)?

10. In public places, when you encounter women that you think are gay, what is your most frequent reaction?

11. How do you think the majority of lesbians react or respond to "spotting" another dyke in public? That is, if you think there is a standard lesbian reaction to "gaydar," what would it be?

12. Does your reaction to lesbians in public places vary by situation and context? If so, can you describe a type of situation, or environment, that encourages interaction between lesbians and one that does not?

13. In this last question of the section, I encourage you to think (and write) about a situation in which you had contact with a stranger (or strangers) based on the assumption of shared sexual identity (e.g., as gay/ queer/lesbian). Please describe the situation paying attention to details, if you remember them. In the passage below, I provide a scenario from my own experiences to give you an example. This is a very minute episode of interaction and I could also analyze the many instances of connections of longer duration with lesbian strangers.

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4. In terms of "diversity", can you think of any concerns around race/class/age and other differences with respect to the spaces we create/use in cities? For example, are some lesbian spaces primarily occupied by certain subcultures in the larger lesbian "community"?

5. If you have any further thoughts on this topic or questions you might like to ask, please put them in this last section. In asking these questions, I may have overlooked crucial issues around lesbian identity, diversity, conflict and urban spaces. (Use the back of page if required.)

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