
Lesbian Spaces: Sydney, 1945-1978

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When young Sydneysider, Margaret, had a holiday romance in the late 1950s with a woman and decided that she was a lesbian, she came up against a problem. The difficulty was, she claimed: 'there were no lesbians in Sydney... as far as I knew – I'd never seen anything about them or photographs or read anything about them.'¹ Lesbian Sydney, for Margaret, did not exist. Desire between women was something that might be expressed in exotic, overseas locations. But on her return to Sydney, she initially resigned herself to a life of isolation. Only a year or so later, however, Margaret had met a woman at work with whom she began a relationship and the two women lived together for a few years until the other woman left to get married.

It was now the 1960s and a heartbroken Margaret, left in isolation again, chanced upon a network of lesbians who frequented a pub on

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Oxford Street opposite Centennial Park. Although rather put off by the women's manners and appearance, Margaret socialised and slept with these women for some years. The founding, however, of lesbian and gay campaigning organisation Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP Inc), in July 1970, enabled Margaret, in her words, to 'fall into a whole pool of lesbians.'² Margaret became the organiser of CAMP Inc's women's group, and her life became centred on the political and social activities of lesbian feminist circles in Sydney's Inner West. Margaret's story reflects the shifting spatial dimensions of lesbian Sydney between the 1940s and the 1970s. Drawing on oral history interviews with Sydney lesbians like Margaret, this article considers what lesbian Sydney might have looked like in the decades after the war.³ What did Sydney mean to women as both an imagined and a real location in which they might express their desires for other women? And where was lesbian Sydney in the years between 1945 and 1978?

The development of urban homosexual subcultures has been a central concern of lesbian and gay historians since the 1970s, with scholarship in the US and elsewhere presenting urban centres as unique sites of gay community formation. George Chauncey's classic *Gay New York* identifies a thriving urban homosexual subculture in New York in the interwar years. More recent scholarship, such as Matt Houlbrook's *Queer London*, problematises notions of gay community and indeed of a fixed homosexual identity but, by its metropolitan focus, reiterates the centrality of the urban in narratives of the construction and enactment of sexual identities.⁴ The role played by commercial bar scenes in fostering lesbian community and identity in the mid-twentieth-century has been carefully explored in works such as Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy's major study of the lesbian bar community in Buffalo, New York State, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, and Jill Gardiner's chronicle of London nightclub, the Gateways.⁵

In recent years, historians such as John Howard, in his exploration of gay male culture in the American South, have sought to question this characterisation of urban areas as central to gay life, providing evidence of the vibrant queer networks which have existed outside the metropolis.⁶ Drawing on this approach, this article seeks to further complicate the urban/rural binary, pointing to the ways in which movement between the urban and rural operated to open up lesbian networks both within and outside the city. I also exploring the diverse ways in which Sydney came to be constructed (or not) as a 'lesbian space' through imagination and lived experience in the post-war decades.

IMAGINING LESBIAN SYDNEY

For many women 'lesbian Sydney' was an imagined concept before it was a material space and as such it meant many different things to different women in the post-war decades. As a metropolitan centre with an increasingly cosmopolitan cultural make-up, brought about by post-war immigration from Europe and Asia, Sydney represented a space of possibility onto which women from elsewhere could project their hopes and desires. For some locals, like Margaret in the 1950s, Sydney was a place devoid of lesbians. But for others, Sydney began to represent a place to move to, one that seemed to offer a range of possibilities.

Laurie moved to Sydney from WA in the 1960s, 'because', she said, 'it was very homophobic in the town that I lived in, it was really redneck country and it was too hard to come out... it was a mining town and it was all men... so that was no good so we, me and my partner at the time, jumped a train and came straight to Sydney.'⁷ Sydney represented a place where Laurie believed she could be open about her desires for women, and also where she imagined there would be large numbers of women for her to choose from. For Elizabeth, who moved to Sydney from Melbourne in 1967, the city offered a freedom to be in a lesbian relationship, which she had not enjoyed in Melbourne. She recalled: 'The reason we decided to go to Sydney was because Sydney was more cosmopolitan, that you could be more what you were there. You see I had made a decision that Melbourne was a) my home town [and] b) that I'd assessed that there were all these stuffy people around and I'd heard... that Sydney was a much better place to be... it was just a faster, nicer, whizzier place.' After living in Sydney for some time, she concluded that this freedom came from the fact that 'no-one cared what you did... I mean it was a very egocentric city and still is, I think. People didn't give a hoot about you.'⁸

Historians have frequently noted that cities and large urban centres attracted lesbians and gay men hoping to find gay subcultures and communities. Sydney was no exception, drawing women from country NSW, interstate and even New Zealand in the post-war decades.⁹ Some women travelled alone, simply hoping that a large city would offer greater freedoms. Others were acting on suggestions from lovers or lesbian contacts. Most were able to find lesbian spaces in the city or build up networks of friends. But it was a slow process, depending on chance encounters with other lesbians at work and elsewhere, or following the occasional hint offered by a casual remark or a newspaper article.

The meanings that Sydney had for these migrants were often complex and multi-layered, so that women might have come to the city

for one reason, only to find that it impacted on their understanding and experience of their sexuality in many different ways. For Valerie, who moved to Sydney from country NSW in 1970, the opportunities which Sydney offered represented a different kind of freedom from that which she had experienced in the country. She explained:

But there was this wonderful freedom in the city, that living in the country everybody knows everybody and if you were seen somewhere it would get around. But in Sydney you could be more anonymous which is probably why a lot of women go to the city because you can disappear more easily and have a bit more privacy... I think that's why a lot of people move to the city. For me, it wasn't for that reason, it was wanting to get away from my family and a country town, I suppose.¹⁰

While Sydney offered Valerie a space away from her family and community, it also helped to reshape her sexuality in unexpected ways. Valerie had already had a number of relationships with other women during her teenage years in southern NSW, but the move to Sydney provided her with new ways to think about her sexuality. Finding lesbian communities at first centred on the bar scene, but later the political scenes of Vietnam protests and feminism. Valerie was prompted to consider the broader implications of her same-sex attraction beyond her own personal experience, and began to consider the possibility of being open about her sexuality to those around her. She recalled:

Well, it was funny, because I think, when I first became aware of the whole lesbian scene, and there was a lot of angst about whether you were a lesbian and who did you tell, and it was all a bit underground and you never let know people know at work and stuff like that. And I figured I'd already had two relationships with women, but I didn't know about lesbianism somehow... and it wasn't until... the early 70s, that it was an issue. And I thought: 'It can't be an issue for me because I've already done it.' You know I didn't know it was a big deal. It was just, that was just what happened, you know... It's interesting because people always talked about telling their families and coming out to their families and stuff and mostly they were traumatic, very traumatic stories... So I didn't want to go through that. I didn't want to push

it because I didn't know how Mum and Dad would react.¹¹

FINDING LESBIAN SYDNEY

If lesbian Sydney meant different things to different people throughout this period, its physical location was equally difficult to pinpoint. Where was lesbian Sydney? Not in Epping, according to Chris, who lived there with her girlfriend for a year in 1975 while attending university. She recalled: 'So we were kind of really just the two of us, living in Epping, going to uni... And having a little, little inklings... that there was actually another world out there... So yeah, I was a bit, bit out of it, really, for that year.'¹² The following year, Chris and her partner moved from their flat in Epping to a lesbian sharehouse in Redfern and found an exciting new lesbian space. Chris explained:

I remember walking in this, it was a pretty decrepit house in Redfern, and there were three couples living in it, and... they had a spare room out back, and I walked out and it... had been spray-painted, you know 'Publish Women or Perish' and 'Lesbianism. Why Settle for Less?' and stuff like that. So that was our bedroom. Yeah, so we walked into this room and it was just, for us, we were very much engrossed in the two of us and you know wrote all kinds of poetry to each other... so this was... a real eye-opener of somewhere quite different. And you know, there was sea grass all over the floor and... it was just an entirely different kind of set up – we had shagpile at our house in Epping.¹³

For Chris, lesbian Sydney was not defined by a house in the suburbs shared by an introspective, poetry-writing lesbian couple, although this was undoubtedly an existence typical of many women who desired other women in the post-war decades. Instead it was located in the larger concentrations of activist lesbians in the inner-city. However, if Redfern encompassed some aspects of lesbian Sydney in 1975, different suburbs might have been regarded as potentially lesbian in earlier decades.

In 1955, the *Truth* newspaper described Kings Cross as the 'Sink of Sydney' because of claims that lesbianism was 'rife' in the area. In an article exposing the practice of 'Black magic' and 'sexual perversion' in the area, the *Truth* claimed:

Female homosexuality is being practised in Sydney on an unprecedented scale. Police and sociologists fear that it will become as great a social menace as male perversion. In living memory no woman has actually been charged with acts of lesbianism, but experienced officers of the Vice and Consorting Squads say that nonetheless female perverts are active and numerous around Sydney. Most of them live in the Kings Cross area... Police told *Truth* this week that dozens of mannishly-dressed lesbian couples can be seen in Darlinghurst Rd., Kings Cross, every afternoon and night.¹⁴

The *Truth* alleged that these 'mannish' lesbians both lived and socialised in the Kings Cross area, drawing attention to themselves through 'brawls' over women at local hotels. Oral histories and other personal testimonies suggest that a small number of lesbians were socialising alongside gay men in the Kings Cross area in the 1950s. In his semi-autobiographical novel, *At the Cross*, Jon Rose describes a camp party at Potts Point in the Eastern suburbs, during the Second World War, at which lesbian painters and actresses mixed with drag queens and camp window-dressers.¹⁵

By the mid 1960s a camp bar scene was beginning to welcome women in the central eastern suburbs of Bondi and Oxford Street.¹⁶ This mirrored the development of commercial subcultures in the UK and US in the mid twentieth century, although local factors such as Australian licensing laws, population size and cultural factors meant that Sydney's lesbian bar scene was slower to emerge.¹⁷ Again, lesbians joined a mixed scene dominated by gay men and drag queens in venues such as the Chez Ivy wine bar in Bondi Junction and the Purple Onion coffee shop on Anzac Parade. This was a hidden subculture, frequented by small numbers of women and difficult to identify from the outside. Virginia remembered the scene in the 1960s as: 'A bit secretive, like it was a bit like, you know, well I hope no-one sees me from work, kind of thing.'¹⁸ For Ruth, however, the secrecy was a positive aspect of the lesbian subculture: 'It was far better than, it's all out in the open now, you felt like you were, had this very special sort of semi-secret society that you were part of and that other people were excluded from.'¹⁹

While some women found the lesbian bar culture in this period to be positive and affirming, others had less happy memories of the commercial subculture. Kris, a Sydneysider who began to go out on the local lesbian bar scene in the 1960s, said 'it was a horrible scene, the women's scene – the lesbian scene in those days. There was nothing nice

about it. It was clandestine... The women were – a lot of the women were thugs and... you know, you had to fight. You had to fight.’²⁰ She described lesbian Sydney in this period as violent, intimidating and connected with the criminal underworld. Margaret also described the scene as rough, and remembered being shocked by the women she met when she found her first camp bar on Oxford Street in the 1960s. There were, she recalled, ‘all these scruffy looking women sat around, dressed not very becomingly... like road workers. Oh pants, well I would wear pants, but really old beat up old gear and short hair cuts and rather rough looking, I thought, and their conversation was too, rather coarse, mixed with expletives.’²¹

For others, however, it was an emotionally uplifting experience. When Laurie moved to Sydney in the 1960s in search of a lesbian community, a chance encounter in a pub led to her being taken to a camp bar called Candy’s in Paddington. She recalled: ‘I walked in there and it was like seventh heaven. It was full of lesbians from wall to carpet to wall you know? And drag queens. I saw my first drag show there and that was it for me. It was just... We went there every Friday night to Saturday night for the next ten fifteen years I think?’²² Carolyn echoed this sense of belonging on first entering a Sydney camp bar in the 1960s:

For me, finding Chez Ivy’s at age 19 was a wonderful experience. I’d found a place that felt like home. I suppose I’m not the only one to experience the feeling that an enormous weight lifted from my shoulders... It was that welcome feeling of being amongst friends – people just like you.²³

For many women, however, lesbian Sydney was not defined by the public spaces of a bar scene, but rather by private networks of friends built up over a lifetime.

The hidden nature of the camp bar culture meant that only a few women were able or wished to locate it, and most socialised instead with women they had met through chance encounters at work or in sporting or theatre groups. For these women, lesbian Sydney meant the beaches and parks where they met up with friends for picnics, or each other’s houses, where they held private parties on a Saturday night. Sandy met up with a small number of lesbian friends at beaches and on bushwalks as a teenager in 1950s Sydney. A chance encounter with an old schoolfriend one day resulted in the two girls going for a walk on Manly Beach. Sandy recalled: ‘The onset of rain forced us to find a sheltered place, almost hidden by rock, and there on the earth I had my second

experience with a woman.²⁴ This encounter led to an ongoing affair and Sandy's friend came to her house for cups of tea and more kissing and touching under the covers in Sandy's bed. Public spaces continued to be important, however, and a few months later, when Sandy decided to introduce this woman to her other lesbian friend, the three went on a bushwalk to a rock cabin near Forestville.²⁵

Beverley and Georgina, who met in Sydney in the years after the Second World War, also recalled a diverse social life in the 1940s and 1950s both in public and private spaces. The couple met at a picnic organised by a mutual friend and, after building a network of about eight or nine lesbian friends, socialised at picnics, tennis clubs and at each other's houses. The women would also go on holiday together, staying in motels or renting an old shack on the Central Coast.²⁶ The Central Coast was a popular holiday destination for lesbian couples and groups in the 1950s and 1960s as it was for many Sydneysiders. Carolyn and her partner met a lesbian couple from Sydney while on holiday at The Entrance in the 1960s and these women introduced them to a lesbian and gay bar scene and a wider circle of lesbian friends.²⁷ Carolyn's experience, and that of other Sydney women who encountered lesbians while holidaying in country NSW, problematizes the picture of urban areas as sites of vibrant, visible lesbian and gay community which emerges from much of the scholarship on gay subcultures and urban migration. For these women, unable to locate other lesbians, despite living in a metropolitan centre, it was travel outside urban areas which enabled them to identify and make contact with other lesbians.

LESBIAN SYDNEY AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

The emergence of the women's and gay liberation movements in the early 1970s began a shift for some women from private to more public spheres of lesbian expression as well as a geographical shift westwards to the Inner West. The Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP Inc) was based in the Inner West with club rooms on Darling Street, Balmain, and then on Glebe Point Road in Glebe. Two years later, CAMP was joined by Sydney Gay Liberation in the same area.²⁸ Although the two groups were regarded by contemporaries as having different political philosophies – with CAMP Inc adopting a reformist approach and Sydney Gay Liberation taking a more revolutionary stance – both focused their work on challenging social prejudice relating to homosexuality and increasing the visibility of lesbians and gay men. As a result of these activities, the lesbian and gay political groups offered an opportunity for some lesbians to reach out to other women for the first

time. The Inner West became a hub of lesbian and gay political activism, with regular meetings and debates taking place, as well as fundraising dances for gay and women's liberation campaigns at the Glebe and Balmain town halls. CAMP Inc held weekly parties in its clubrooms in Balmain, as well as, for a short time, hosting a women's group there.²⁹ Some hotels in the area, such as the Rose Hotel in Chippendale, also began to be frequented by feminist and lesbian activists and many women chose to move to the area to be closer to these new amenities.

While some areas of the city might be regarded as more 'lesbian' than others, however, it was often not a suburb but an individual building which held meaning as a lesbian space for women. In the early 1970s, CAMP Inc's club rooms played an important role in providing a lesbian space and at the same time, the advent of Women's Liberation opened up new possibilities for many Sydney women who were attracted to other women. When 18-year-old Sandra saw two women kissing at a party in 1970 and decided she was a lesbian, she began to look for other women like herself. She recalled:

What happened was, not long after that, I went into Women's Liberation House, which was at that time in Alberta Street in the City... And anyway... through the Women's House then I met a whole lot of other women. When I went there I just went to see what was going on and a woman invited me to go to a consciousness-raising group that was on at the time... and there were a lot of lesbians involved in the political and social things that were happening there... I just went there. I can still, I went with some trepidation but with a sense that I needed to be there. It was a time when that Robyn Morgan book, *Sisterhood is Powerful* had just been published and I, I had somehow a copy of that... and I had this sense of this is where I would belong and, you know, it proved to be [the] case.³⁰

Moreover, just as private houses had played an important role in lesbian socialising in the immediate post-war decades, as a location for private parties, with the advent of a lesbian political movement in the 1970s, lesbian collective houses became a central part of the lesbian scene. Sandra, who became part of the lesbian feminist scene in Sydney in the 1970s, recalled:

We lived in big group shared households, you know lesbian houses. And two of the earliest ones in Sydney were... one was in Petersham and it was called Canterbury Castle because it was on Canterbury Road and it was a big house and... a whole lot of lesbians lived there. And there was also one on Crystal Street in Petersham, which I think was called Crystal Street.³¹

In 1974, members of the radicalesbian households at Canterbury Castle and Crystal Street were interviewed by feminist journal *Refractory Girl* for an article on collective households. They told the interviewer that what held the household together was a shared commitment to the women's movement and the fact that there was 'more energy to be directed towards others women'.³²

Many of the women in shared households would have been on the dole or working in casual jobs, but there was frequently an ideological commitment to sharing domestic responsibilities. Chris had fond memories of the shared lesbian household she lived in in Lewisham and the sense of togetherness which came from sharing household tasks. She recalled: 'We had our bikes and you know, we'd go off to the Paddy's Market, somebody'd go to the Paddy's Market, somebody'd go to the butchers, somebody'd go there, so we did all that. So it was a very nice household. Mind you, I did get thrown out for not doing any housework.'³³

For the women who lived there, collective houses represented a small lesbian community in themselves. Sandra recalled that 'some of them were quite big houses, like one of the ones that I lived in, in Redfern, in Chalmers St, it was six bedrooms... so you might have 10 people living there and then you'd have people coming and going as well.'³⁴ For lesbian feminist visitors from other states, lesbian collective houses were often the first port of call when they visited Sydney and provided a base from which to engage in political activities in the city. One of the residents of Crystal Street told *Refractory Girl*: 'Here at Crystal Street we get so many visitors – there's a continuous exchange of people. We've got people from Melbourne staying here now: Melbourne, Adelaide, Newcastle, Canberra, New Zealand.'³⁵

CONCLUSION

The meanings of 'lesbian Sydney' varied significantly between different women in the post-war decades, so that, for some, the city was not a lesbian space and for others it represented a unique place offering freedom of sexual expression. Its physical location was equally difficult

to pinpoint, with individual buildings holding particular significance for some, and more liminal spaces such as parks and beaches becoming temporary lesbian spaces for others. Nevertheless, a few broader trends can be traced. Throughout the period from the 1940s to the 1970s there was a general shift in the hub of lesbian activity from East to West, with the growing importance of the Inner West as a focal point for political activism and lesbian socialising. At the same time, it is possible to identify an increasing overlap between the public and private spheres. By the 1970s domestic, social and political activities were increasingly merged in lesbian feminist house shares and in dances and social events organised by campaigning organisations.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Interview with Margaret Jones, 12 September 2007.
- ² *ibid.*
- ³ This research draws primarily on a collection of oral history interviews conducted by the author with 22 NSW women who self-identified as lesbians. The women were aged between 18 and 80, mostly of European origin and drawn from a range of class backgrounds.
- ⁴ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, Basic Books, New York, 1994; Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005.
- ⁵ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davies, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, Penguin Books, New York, 1994; Jill Gardiner, *From the Closet to the Screen: Women at the Gateways Club, 1945-85*, Pandora Press, London, 2003.
- ⁶ John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1999.
- ⁷ Interview with Laurie van Camp by Sandra Mackay, 18 February 2008, Pride History Group Collection, Sydney.
- ⁸ Interview with Elizabeth by Ruth Ford, 6 May 1992, Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives.
- ⁹ See for example, Bob Cant (ed), *Invented identities: Lesbians and gays talk about migration*, Cassell, London, 1997; Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983; S. Adler and J. Brenner, 'Gender and space: lesbians and gay men in the city', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol 16, 1992, pp24-34; Gill Valentine, 'Desperately seeking Susan: a geography of lesbian friendships', *Area25*, 1993, pp109-116.
- ¹⁰ Interview with Valerie Odewahn, 20 May 2008.
- ¹¹ *ibid.*
- ¹² Interview with Chris Pearce, 6 November 2007.
- ¹³ *ibid.*
- ¹⁴ 'The Sink of Sydney!', *Truth*, Sunday 25 September 1955, p7.
- ¹⁵ Jon Rose, *At the Cross*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1961, pp16-17.
- ¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of this social scene, see Rebecca Jennings, 'A Room Full of Women: Lesbian Bars and Social Spaces in Postwar Sydney', *Women's History Review*, vol 21, no 5, 2012), pp813-830.

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- ¹⁷ On the development of a lesbian bar scene in the UK and US, see Kennedy and Davies, *Boots of Leather*; Elise Chenier, 'Rethinking class in lesbian bar culture: living "The Gay Life" in Toronto, 1955-1965', *Left History*, vol 9, no 2, 2004, pp85-118; Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, Penguin, New York, 1991; Gardiner, *From the Closet to the Screen*; Rebecca Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Women Since 1500*, Greenwood World Publishing, Oxford, 2007; Rebecca Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Postwar Britain, 1945-71*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2007.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Virginia Binning and Ruth Ritchie by Sandra Mackay and author, 7 April 2007, Pride History Group Collection.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*
- ²⁰ Interview with Kris Melmouth, 25 August 2011.
- ²¹ Interview with Margaret Jones, 18 September 2007.
- ²² Interview with Laurie van Camp by Sandra Mackay, 18 February 2008, Pride History Group Collection, Sydney.
- ²³ Carolyn Bloye, Unpublished talk given at launch of Pride History Group, Out and About: Sydney's lesbian social scene, 1960s-80s, Sydney, Pride History Group, 2009, on 28 February 2009.
- ²⁴ Sandra Willson, unpublished memoir, p54.
- ²⁵ *ibid.*, p57.
- ²⁶ Interview with Beverley and Georgina, 22 December 2008.
- ²⁷ Interview with Carolyn Bloye by Sandra Mackay, 9 September 2007, Pride History Group Collection.
- ²⁸ See Denise Thompson, *Flaws in the Social Fabric: Homosexuals and society in Sydney*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985; Graham Willett, *Living Out Loud: A history of gay and lesbian activism in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000; Robert Reynolds, *From Camp to Queer: Remaking the Australian Homosexual*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2002.
- ²⁹ Interview with Margaret Jones, 18 September 2007.
- ³⁰ Interview with Sandra Mackay, 2 July 2007.
- ³¹ *ibid.*
- ³² 'A Radicalesbian lifestyle', *Refractory Girl*, Summer, 1974, p12.
- ³³ Interview with Chris Pearce, 6 November 2007.
- ³⁴ Interview with Sandra Mackay, 2 July 2007.
- ³⁵ 'A Radicalesbian lifestyle', p12.