LIS 665-01: Projects in Digital Archives  
Summer A 2013

Class Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays 5:30 – 9:20p, May 13 to June 12, 2013  
Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays 4:00-5:00p, and by appointment  
Credits: 3  
Prerequisites: LIS 654 (Information Technologies), or by permission  
Location: PMC 611

Bulletin Description:

This class is a combination of theoretical, practical and hands-on approaches to digital library creation. Topics will include metadata creation, image capture, archival storage and Web presentation. Students will learn about the theories behind the practices that they will implement, and will gain an understanding about the administrative issues associated with the successful implementation of a digitization project.

Detailed Description:

This course provides an opportunity for students to learn how to create a digital archive, and practice the implementation of such a digital archive with a partner institution. Additionally, students have the opportunity to exercise their creativity in the design of a tool, program, or project that makes use of digital archives for educational or social purposes.

Course Goals:

- Familiarize students with the current discourses in the area of digital archives, including theoretical and practical aspects.  
- Introduce students to the digitization of audio and visual materials, and the handling of materials that are born digital.  
- Learn about metadata and standards used in digital archive creation, as well as digital infrastructure.  
- Anticipate managing digital archives in a time of technical change, including issues related in archiving the web, managing digital rights, and preserving digital content.

Student Learning Objectives:

- Students will be able to digitize analog material into digital form.  
- Students will be able to create metadata for a digital archive.  
- Students will be able to identify rights issues (legal, ethical, moral) with digitized materials.  
- Students will be able to work with a team to design a digital archive using knowledge of information architecture and usability.  
- Students will be able to work with a team to implement a digital archive for a small institution using open source software.
Course Schedule and Readings

5/13 – Introduction

- Overview of Syllabus and Projects
- Assign topic presenters of class readings
- Post a photo of yourself and fill-out your profile on the LMS

Sign-up for the Society of American Archivists (SAA) Listserv (do not have to be a dues-paying member); also, sign-up for any roundtable listservs that may be of interest.

http://www2.archivists.org/listservs

Doing Digital Archiving: The Practice of and its Challenges


Further Reading:


Reflection Questions:

Gilliland-Swetland (2000) discusses the use of the “archival perspective” in thinking through the movement of resources to the digital information environment. What is the “archival perspective,” and how is it useful (or not) in thinking about the digital information environment?

5/15 – Archiving Audio


Reflection Questions:

Schulman discusses her rationale for archiving audio. What is her rationale?

When working with digital archives, it is common to ask the question, “how much space will we need to save all this material?” For the LHA project, approximately how much space will we need just to store the audio (ignoring other data such as meta-data)? We know that we have 20 cassette tapes, and those could run as long as 60 or 90 minutes. However, how long would an interview ideally take? 20 minutes? 30 minutes? How could you find out without listening to every tape? Assume if we used 24-bit/96 kHZ stereo audio and create uncompressed files, what is the low-end and the high-end of disk space we would need? Also, assume if we used 16-bit/44.1 kHZ stereo audio and create uncompressed files, what is the low-end and the high-end of disk space we would need?
5/20 – Metadata and Standards


**Review:**

Society of American Archivists, Standards Portal: [http://www2.archivists.org/standards](http://www2.archivists.org/standards)

**Further Reading:**


Dublin Core Metadata Initiative: [http://dublincore.org/documents](http://dublincore.org/documents)
OAIster (search engine for OAI-harvested metadata): [http://www.oaister.org](http://www.oaister.org)

**Reflection Questions:**

Many different metadata standards and structuring devices exist for a variety of purposes. Why would you want to adopt a standard metadata schema?

**Digital Infrastructure: Content Management Systems**


**Further Reading:**

Archivematica - [https://www.archivematica.org](https://www.archivematica.org)
ArchivesSpace - [http://www.archivespace.org/](http://www.archivespace.org/)
Archon - [http://www.archon.org/](http://www.archon.org/)
Duraspase - [http://duraspase.org/](http://duraspase.org/)
Omeka - [http://omeka.org/](http://omeka.org/)
(Example Omeka site) Digital Amherst - [http://www.digitalamherst.org/](http://www.digitalamherst.org/)
(Example Omeka site) digitalMETRO - [http://nycdigital.org/](http://nycdigital.org/)


**Reflection Questions:**
This topic’s readings discuss content management systems (CMS). CMS are used for storing and publishing digital content, which can be documents, video, audio, etc. Do you have any experience working with any of the CMS mentioned in the two articles. For example, have you used WordPress to create a blog?

5/22 - Digital Infrastructure: Introduction to Storage, Databases, Networks, and Cloud Computing

Storage:


Databases:


Networks:


Cloud Computing:


Further Reading:


Reflection Questions:

This topic’s readings and videos discuss the core infrastructure of digital archives: storage, databases, networks and cloud computing. Most (if not all) digital archives make extensive use of these components. Of these four discussion topics, which do you feel the most comfortable with? For example, have you ever created or used a relational database (MySQL, Microsoft Access, Oracle)? If so, describe the project and how you used a relational database. How comfortable are you with your understanding of how the Internet works (or other networks such as Ethernet)? How comfortable are you with your understanding of data
storage and some of the related concepts, such as RAID? Which component(s) would you like to discuss more fully in this class section?

**Designing Digital Interfaces: Information Architecture, Usability, and Design Considerations**


**Further Reading:**


**Reflection Questions:**

This topic’s readings discuss user interfaces to digital archives. A variety of approaches are discussed in the readings with respect to designing a user interface, from a Web 2.0 approach (Cocciolo, 2010) to one specific to designing a historical website (Cohen & Rosenzweig, 2005). Discuss the readings and a user interface that you love OR hate. Why does it provoke such feelings of love or hate? How did your feelings about it change (or not) after using it for a period of time?

**5/27 – No Class; Memorial Day**

**5/29 – Managing Born Digital Collections**


**Further Reading:**


Digitization 101: [http://hurstassociates.blogspot.com/](http://hurstassociates.blogspot.com/)


**Reflection Questions:**

Very quickly, the world has moved from the intellectual production of physical stuff (hand-written manuscripts, typewritten manuscripts, print-outs, etc.) to one of virtual objects (e.g., MS Word document that may never be printed out, a shared Google document, etc.). The challenge for archives is to try to create a primary source record, when all the tools of the trade and ways of doing things are changing and/or need to be changed. How do we create a primary source record in this environment, and how are people in the field responding to this challenge? How would you respond to it?

**Digital Rights Management**


**Further Reading:**


Digital Archives: Navigating the Legal Shoals (April 2010):

**Reflection Questions:**

Besek (2003) outlines the copyright issues relevant to the creation of a digital archive. What are the issues? Given what she says about copyright, what do you think the implications are for an oral history digital archive (like the LHA project)? Are there other digital rights issues other than copyright that we should be paying attention to?

**6/3 – Archiving Visual Media**

Further Reading:


Reflection Questions:

What are some of the choices that a digitization project has to make? What affects the answers if you are scanning:

- a famous manuscript (e.g. the Declaration of Independence)
- large collections of manuscripts (e.g. the papers of some Senator)
- printed 18th or 19th century books
- recent printed material
- flat works of art (paintings, posters, ....).

Technical Question: A collection of 96,000 4 X 5-inch transparencies is scanned at 400 dpi, 24-bit color, and then losslessly compressed at a 1.3:1 ratio. Calculate the cost of hard disk storage (at .75 cents/GB) needed for this collection.

Digital Archives in Teaching and Learning


Further Reading:


Reflection Questions:

Teaching and learning is the cornerstone of our K-12 education system, and one of the most important components of our higher education system. Many archives and libraries are beginning to realize that one way to increase their visibility and impact is to better connect themselves with a teaching and learning mission. What are some strategies to do this, as described by Robyns (2001) and Krause (2010)?

Do you have any teaching experience (either K-12 or higher education)? Have you ever used primary sources in your teaching? Do you think archives should be investing more time and energy in teaching or learning, or are they better off doing other tasks, such as archival management, or working on the “move to digital”?

6/5 – Digital Preservation


Further Reading:


Archive.org: http://archive.org/about/


**Reflection Questions:**

This topic’s reading discusses the idea of a trusted digital repository and the attributes that should make up such a repository. Are there aspects that you find essential, superfluous, or surprising?

**Personal Digital Archiving**


**Review:**


**Further Reading:**


Personal Digital Archiving 2013, Program: http://mith.umd.edu/pda2013/schedule/program/

**Reflection Questions:**

Walker (2011) discusses the growing interest individuals have in their digital afterlife, and discusses some projects and their implications for this emerging area. Marshall (2008) discusses some challenges to personal digital archiving, and offers some strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Given the number of issues presented here (and there are many), what problem do you think is greatest facing personal digital archiving, and what do you think a possible solution to it may be?

Have you had any digital preservation challenges in your past experiences (e.g., unable to access digital content) and what were they?
6/10 - Web Archiving


Further Reading:


Reflection Question:

This topic’s reading discusses web archiving. Masanès (2006) discusses why the web should be archived and preserved, and the primary methods for capturing the web. Giving the arguments he provides, do you think libraries and archives should be archiving the web?

6/12 – Design Project Presentations, Hand-off LHA Project

Textbooks, Readings, and Materials

No textbook is required for this course. All readings are available online via the LMS (http://lms.pratt.edu).

Course Requirements

Students’ course grades will be determined by performance on the following activities:

1. Class Participation (20%)
2. Reflection Responses (20%) – 10 responses required over the course of the semester
3. Digital Archive Creation Project (25%)
   4a. Proposal (2-5 pages) (5%) – due May 29
   4b. Design Document (5-10 pages) (15%) - due June 12, last day of class
   4c. Presentation (5%) – present on June 12, last day of class
4. Design Project (25%)
5. Self-assessment (10%) – due June 12, last day of class

Class Participation

Students are expected to be prepared and to contribute to class discussions each week with scholarly analyses and insights. In addition, each week one student or a team of two students will present their perspective on the topic of the readings for the week. This is an opportunity to consolidate your (or your team’s) understanding on a topic, to present your perspective, to make novel connections to other domains, and to relate the readings to real-world experience. Presenters may use the essential questions posed (available on the LMS) to guide their presentations, or may choose their own direction in discussing the readings. Presenters should be prepared to make around a 10-minute presentation, and conclude with some questions or issues they would like to discuss more thoroughly. Remember that everyone in the class has read the week’s readings, so it should not simply be a summarization of what we have already read.

The schedule of presenters will be decided on the first day of class. Please note that since this is an accelerated, 5-week course, no absences will be permitted.

Reflection Responses
For each course topic, students are expected to write at least two paragraphs that reflect on the readings. Reflections can be in response to the essential questions posted on the LMS. Students responses should be posed on the LMS by 5pm (at the latest) on the day of class (late responses will receive a reduced grade). Please do not bring in a hard-copy or email unless the LMS is unavailable. The purpose of these responses is to allow students the opportunity to reflect on the readings and share their reflections with the other members of the class. Students are encouraged to read the responses by their fellow classmates (this is, however, not a requirement). Based on interests, students may choose two topics NOT to do. This means by the end of the semester, each student should have posted 10 responses (there are 13 topics total, and students are not expected to write a reflection on this first class session).

Please note that the instructor will refer to these responses during class discussion and may ask students to further clarify or expand on their response.

**Digital Archive Creation Project (DACP)**

The objective of the Projects in Digital Archives course is to provide students with the theoretical, practical and hands-on experience in digital archive creation. In order to provide the most relevant and realistic learning experience for students, students will digitize an actual archival collection and develop the means of access to that collection through creating a web-presence.

We will be working with the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) [http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/](http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/), the world’s oldest and largest collection of materials by and about lesbians and their communities, to digitize a collection of spoken word archives. Specifically, we will be working to digitize the raw-audio recordings that went into the creation of Kennedy, E. L. & Davis, M. D. (1993). *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*. New York: Routledge. This is a seminal text in LGBT studies, and the introduction is included with this syllabus. The book is an anthropological study that uses oral history to “document how working-class lesbians—African American, European American, and Native Americans—created a community whose members not only supported one another for survival in an extremely negative and punitive environment, but also boldly challenged and helped to change social life and morals in the U.S.” (p. 1).

LHA has a large collection of audio materials, including spoken word materials. In the Fall of 2011, LIS 665 (Projects in Digital Archives) created a digital archive for LHA based on the Omeka content management system, available at [http://herstories.prattsils.org](http://herstories.prattsils.org). We will be completing the work they begun by digitizing and making available a collection of spoken word archives, currently available in cassette tape.

**Design Project**

**Overview**

Each day, the web expands with new web pages, tweets, status updates, videos, files, links, among many other types of contributions. With the deluge of new information, a challenge associated with contributing any primary source materials to the web is making it meaningful to users. Relatedly, what constitutes a “digital archive” is continually evolving (e.g., Twitter is now archived at the Library of Congress). Your challenge is to design your “ideal” project, tool, or program that could be used to accompany the digital archive being created for LHA or some other archiving area. Unlike that archive we will be creating, this project is more about designing—not fully implementing—some digital archiving idea you are interested in. You should consider the ways in which your project, tool or program makes the content interesting, relevant or useful to new or existing users.
The class will be divided into design groups; these are the same groups as for the Digital Archive Creation Project. Time will be provided in class for groups to meet; however, meeting out of class time may be required. Each group will be expected to deliver a project proposal, a project design document, and a presentation on the last day of class. Details on these aspects are below:

**Proposal**

The Proposal should be 2-5 pages and outline the idea for your project. The proposal should be considered a less fully-fleshed-out version of the project design document (see below). The instructor will provide feedback on the proposal which you can use in further refining your project.

**Design Document**

The project design document should be 5-10 pages, and can include figures and diagrams. This document should take the form of a traditional document (hence, it should not be a Powerpoint or in a presentation form). The design document should address:

a) What is the purpose of your project?

1) Why do we need it?
2) What materials will you use for this project?
3) What educational or learning goals will motivate this effort, if any?
4) What populations of users (if any) will be served?
5) What type of community (if any) will be fostered by this effort?
6) What role (if any) will librarians or archivists play in this project?
7) What will be the size of this effort?
8) What resources will be required?
9) How will the project be assessed?

b) What are the features and functions of the project? Please be specific.

c) Implementation: What do you think would be involved to make this design a reality? Provide estimations.

d) What does the literature and research on digital archives offer in thinking about this project?

**Presentation**

Each group will get 15 minutes to present, and a 5 minute question and answer period. Each group should:

a) Make it fun and educational! Be creative! We have all been subject to ill-prepared or low-energy presentations- avoid it!

b) Discuss the goals, why your project is needed, and what makes your project innovative.

c) Provide a way of demonstrating your design to the class. These may include electronic illustrations (Powerpoint), an interactive simulation, or large paper/drawing presentations. You may also want to consider handouts for the class.

**Self-Assessment**

In one or more pages, reflect on your contribution to the Digital Archive Creation Project (DACP) and the Design Project. What role did you play in each? What were your specific contributions? How would you
rate your performance, and how does it compare to your fellow group members? Please submit by the end of the final class electronically via the LMS.

**Assessment and Evaluation**

1. All assignments must be completed in order to receive a passing grade in the course.
2. SILS is going green: assignments must be turned in electronically via the LMS. Late assignments will receive a reduced grade.
3. Late papers will receive a grade but no comments.
4. Pratt policy: Students with extensive absences (three or more for any reason) will be required to drop the course.

**E-Portfolio**

Starting Fall 2012, all students entering the MSLIS degree program are required to complete an e-portfolio that must be approved by their advisor before they will be permitted to graduate. The e-Portfolio provides students with an opportunity to showcase their best work from the courses they have taken at SILS, and an opportunity to demonstrate they have met the learning objectives of a Master of Information and Library Science.

Work completed for this course may be included in the e-portfolio. Students must demonstrate that their work fulfills at least one of the following learning outcomes:

1. **Research** - Students carry-out and apply research
2. **Communication** - Students demonstrate excellent communication skills and create and convey content
3. **Technology** - Students use information technology and digital tools effectively
4. **User-Centered** - Students apply concepts related to use and users of information and user needs and perspectives
5. **LIS Practice** - Students perform within the framework of professional practice

Detailed information on the learning outcomes, requirements and how to create your e-portfolio is available from: [http://www.pratt.edu/academics/information_and_library_sciences/about_sils/sils_eportfolio/](http://www.pratt.edu/academics/information_and_library_sciences/about_sils/sils_eportfolio/)

**Pratt’s grading scale:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>A 4.0 (96-100)</th>
<th>A- 3.7 (90-95)</th>
<th>B+ 3.3 (87-89)</th>
<th>B 3.0 (83-86)</th>
<th>B- 2.7 (80-82)</th>
<th>C+ 2.3 (77-79)</th>
<th>C 2.0</th>
<th>F 0.0 (0-69)</th>
</tr>
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**Policies**

All Institute-wide policies are listed in the Bulletin under “Community Standards,” which include policies on attendance, academic integrity, plagiarism, computer, and network use. Students who require special accommodations for disabilities must obtain clearance from the Office of Disability Services at the beginning of the semester. They should contact Mai McDonald, Disability Services Coordinator, in the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs, Main Building, Lower Level: 718-636-3711.
How It Began: The Lesbian Herstory Archives of New York City, the largest and oldest Lesbian archive in the world, began as an idea in late 1973. It was started by women in a Lesbian consciousness-raising group in the Gay Academic Union. At one meeting, Julia Stanley and Joan Nestle, who had come out of the pre-Gay Liberation Movement bar culture, talked about the precariousness of Lesbian culture and how so much of our past culture was seen only through patriarchal eyes. Deborah Edel, Sahli Cavallo and Pamela Online, with histories ranging from lesbian-feminism to political lesbianism, joined in and, thus, a new concept was born—a grassroots Lesbian archives.

In 1974 (which we consider our official beginning) the planning began and in 1976 the Lesbian Herstory Archives became a working reality when it opened in the pantry of Joan Nestle’s and Deborah Edel’s apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Joan and Deb became the founding coordinators and began the collection with their personal papers and books. To build grassroots support for the project and to encourage donations to the Archives, they would carry around early journal issues, photographs, letters and so on, in shopping bags, and would speak anywhere—bars, churches, synagogues, women’s festivals, small meetings in people’s living rooms, and so on. As word spread, other individuals and organizations began sending materials. For example, Mabel Hampton, an African-American lesbian, who died in 1989 at the age of 87, donated her extensive collection of 1950’s lesbian paperbacks and women active in the Daughters of Bilitis gave their collection of organizational papers, which included over 1,000 letters and publications.

By the late 1978, Judith Schwarz, a pioneering grass roots Lesbian historian, joined the collective as the third coordinator, bringing with her all her skills in information organizing. To save wear and tear on the more fragile artifacts, the coordinators created a slide show. This meant they could travel around, demonstrating the history of the Archives and raise issues about the challenges facing a Lesbian Archives and Lesbian history work in general, while making appeals for donations of materials. The slide show still exists today, custom fitted to whomever is showing it, and usable as a power point presentation as well.

The Archives began with a steadfast commitment to be a grassroots organization and to rely upon community members to give individually. It is one of the few grassroots organizations to remain this way.

Our Mission and Principles: From the beginning, the Archives’ founders developed a statement of purpose and a set of principles to guide the development of the collection. We adhere to these purposes and principles today.

Statement of Purpose: The Lesbian Herstory Archives exists to gather and preserve records of Lesbian lives and activities so that future generations will have ready access to materials relevant to their lives. The process of gathering this material will uncover and collect our Herstory denied to us previously by patriarchal historians in the interests of the culture that they serve. We will be able to analyze and reevaluate the Lesbian experience; we also hope the existence of the Archives will encourage Lesbians to record their experiences in order to formulate our living Herstory.

We will collect and preserve any materials that are relevant to the lives and experiences of Lesbians: books, magazines, journals, news clippings (from establishment, Lesbian and/or feminist media), bibliographies, photos, historical information, tapes, films, diaries, oral histories, poetry and prose, biographies, autobiographies, notices of events, posters, graphics, music and other memorabilia.

Principles: Many of the Archives’ principles are a radical departure from conventional archival practices. They are inclusive and non-institutional and reveal the Archives’ commitment to living history, to housing the past along with the present. Among the basic principles guiding the Archives are:

- All Lesbian women must have access to the Archives; no academic, political or sexual credentials will be required for use of the collection; race and class must be no barrier to use or inclusion.
- The Archives will collect the prints of all of our lives, not just preserving the records of the famous or published.
- The Archives will be housed within the community, not on an academic campus that is by definition closed to many women.
- The Archives shall be involved in the political struggles of all Lesbians.
- Archival skills shall be taught, one generation of Lesbians to another, breaking the elitism of traditional archives.
- The community should share in the work of the Archives.
- Funding shall be sought from within the communities the Archives serves, rather than from outside sources.
- The Archives will always have a caretaker living in it so that it will always be someone’s home rather than an institution.
- The Archives will never be sold nor will its contents be divided.

Organizational Structure: The Archives was incorporated in 1980 as The Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation, Inc., a not-for-profit foundation. It has always been and remains an all-volunteer organization without paid staff. A Coordinating Committee, made up of volunteers, makes decisions about policies and practices and takes responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the Archives. Each
coordinator also takes on a special area of responsibility, for both the short and the long term. Other volunteers and interns, as well as the coordinators, perform many of the vital tasks of keeping the Archives running. They do the filing, fund raising, cataloging, clipping newspapers and magazines, responding to research and reference questions (by phone and letter), process special collections, give tours, act as part of the speakers bureau, produce the newsletter and staff when possible. Any Archives volunteer may take on a special project when she is willing and able.

The Collection: Today the Archives houses over 11,000 books – by and about lesbians, 12,000 photographs, 370 special collections, 1,600 periodical titles, 1,500 newsletter titles, 1,300 organizational files, 1,560 subject files, thousands of feet of film and video footage, hundreds of oral history tapes, art and artifacts, musical records and tapes, posters and T-Shirts, buttons and personal memorabilia. The range of materials is astonishing – from medical texts to steamy 1950s pulp novels to short-lived Lesbian publications, from rhinestone pasties worn by a Lesbian stripper to a team-autographed softball to a lambda emblazoned hard hat to banners carried in the New York City Dyke March. Also included are files on topics such as Butch/Fem, Lesbian Theater and Lesbians in Africa. We are a living Archives and our collection grows with each mail delivery.

Some Activities of the Archives

- We are open several weekdays and at least one weekend day per week for visitors and researchers. Browsing through the Archives is allowed and encouraged – no one has to have a particular agenda in order to come to or use the Archives.
- Researchers working on a variety of Lesbian topics are always welcomed at the Archives. Coordinators also answer inquiries over the phone, via fax, and regular mail.
- We publish and mail a free newsletter that includes reports on current activities, bibliographic listings, and a reprint of some archival material. Our mailing list includes over 10,000 names.
- We hold a series of events called “At Home With The Archives”. These include video nights, readings, discussions and generally sharing the writing, history, ideas and political discussions/movements of Lesbians.
- We have exhibitions of both historical material and current art. We also have four traveling exhibits, which are available for showing at venues outside of the Archives both in New York and all over the world.
- We continue to present our slide show to groups around the world.
- We provide reference and resource services.
- The Archives lends support to, and shares information with, developing regional archives.
- Bibliographies on Lesbian subjects have been developed and are available to Archives users and researchers.
- The Archives is actively involved in the survival struggles of the Lesbian and Gay Communities.

A True Community Organization: The Archives has grown tremendously because the community has always been involved, always contributing material, energy and money, when asked. It has also thrived because of the unwavering commitment of its coordinators and volunteers. In 1991, after 16 years in Joan Nestle’s apartment, we purchased a building in Park Slope, Brooklyn and officially opened in 1993. Within 4 years we paid off the mortgage and own the building free and clear. The ability to buy the building came about not with a big endowment but by thousands of relatively small contributions, by small house party fundraisers across the country, and by the tireless fundraising of its coordinators and volunteers. The Archives building is a home for all those whose personal and financial efforts helped make this dream into a reality, and for all those who will come after. The Archives coordinators hold this building and its contents in trust for our communities and we take our responsibility seriously.

Vision of the Future: Although the Archives now has a permanent home we continue our fundraising efforts. We sustain ourselves though the generous donations of Lesbians, Gay men and friends from the extended community of caring individuals who support our work. We set our budget and expenses based on the money we receive, not on our projected hopes and dreams. Our first goal is to continue the day-to-day work of running the Archives and maintaining the building. While we are conservative in our spending, keeping ourselves debt free and only doing those projects for which we have money available, we do have our dreams for the future. One is to own a second building nearby, which would give us additional space for our collection and a space large enough for cultural events (theatre and dance performances, for e.g.) along with a large gallery space for exhibitions. On a more modest level we would love to be able to put our entire database on the Internet, so it could be accessible to people around the world. We would also love to be able to provide funded internships for younger lesbians who might not be able to afford the unfunded internship opportunities we now have. As we work towards turning these dreams into reality, the Archives will continue to be a place for every lesbian to visit, to feel at home, to just browse, to work on her own project and to do research on Lesbian history. We will continue to broaden the involvement of volunteers and expand the collection to reflect our ever-changing lives as Lesbians. The Archives will always be a testament to what lesbian community can achieve, and to the power of grassroots organizing.
BOOTS OF LEATHER

Chorus

For she walks in boots of leather
And in slippers made of gold;
She will be a child forever
And forever, she'll be old.
She's the heroine of legends;
She's the eagle and the dove.
She's the daughter of the moon;
She's my sister and my love.

She was born in winter's fury,
with the wind about her ears.
She was raised on strife and sadness,
and the city-dweller's fears.
She was nursed on wine and bloodshed
and she cut her teeth on steel;
and she wept alone in darkness
for the pain she was to feel.

Chorus

Many nights can fill a cavern;
many days can dry the seas;
many years will dull the longing
and erode the memories.
Ever more the granite forests
make a place for her to dwell.
And the streets of sleepy dreaming
Make a story she can tell.

Chorus

—Madeline Davis c. 1974
To the women who have gone before us, brave women, outlaws, who sought only to find a life of love and dignity, and some of them did.
“TO COVER UP THE TRUTH WOULD BE A WASTE OF TIME”: INTRODUCTION

“Things back then were horrible and I think that because I fought like a man to survive I made it somehow easier for the kids coming out today. I did all their fighting for them. I’m not a rich person. I don’t have a lot of money; I don’t even have a little money. I would have nothing to leave anybody in this world, but I have that—that I can leave to the kids who are coming out now, who will come out into the future. That I left them a better place to come out into. And that’s all I have to offer, to leave them. But I wouldn’t deny it. Even though I was getting my brains beaten up I would never stand up and say, ‘No don’t hit me, I’m not gay; I’m not gay.’ I wouldn’t do that. I was maybe stupid and proud, but they’d come up and say, ‘Are you gay?’ And I’d say, ‘Yes I am.’ Pow, they’d hit you. For no reason at all. It was silly and it was ridiculous; and I took my beatings and I survived it.”

—Matty

Working-class lesbians of the 1940s and 1950s searched for and built communities—usually around bars and house parties—in which they could be with others like themselves. Like the woman quoted above they did not deny their lesbianism, despite severe consequences; and today many of them judge their actions as having contributed to a better life for gays and lesbians. Their self-reliance and dream of a better world placed them solidly in the democratic tradition of the United States. But what happened to that independent spirit and hope when it was awakened in working-class lesbians whose very being was an anathema to American morality? Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community tells that story. We document how working-class lesbians—African Americans, European Americans, and Native Americans—created a community whose members not only supported one another for survival in an extremely negative and punitive environment, but also boldly challenged and helped to change social life and morals in the U.S.

Popular culture, the medical establishment, affluent lesbians and gays, and recently, many lesbian feminists have stereotyped members of this community as
low-life societal discards and pathetic imitators of heterosexuality, and therefore hardly self-conscious actors in history. Our own first-hand acquaintance with some older working-class lesbians, who told lively and dramatic stories about the joys and pains of their experiences, led us to question this view. We suspected that they had forged a culture for survival and resistance under difficult conditions and had passed this sense of community on to newcomers; in our minds, these were signs of a movement in its prepolitical stage. Our research has reinforced the appropriateness of this framework, revealing that working-class lesbians of the 1940s and 1950s were strong and forceful participants in the growth of gay and lesbian consciousness and pride, and necessary predecessors of the gay and lesbian liberation movements that emerged in the late 1960s.

John D’Emilio points out that the ideology of gay liberation was based on an intriguing paradox. It was a movement that called for an end to years of secrecy, hiding, and shame; yet its rapid growth suggests that gays and lesbians could not have been completely isolated and hidden in the time period just prior to the movement’s inception. Gay liberation built on and transformed previously existing communities and networks. In his own work, D’Emilio explores in detail how the homophile movement, a network of organizations formed in the 1950s advocating peaceful negotiation for legal change and social acceptance, laid the groundwork for gay and lesbian politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The homophile movement, however, was very small and held itself separate from the large gay and lesbian communities that centered in bars and house parties; its history, therefore, can tell only part of the story. D’Emilio’s work suggests, but does not itself explore, that bar communities were equally important predecessors.

**Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold** is the first book-length study of a mid-century bar community. Focusing on Buffalo, New York, the book aims to explore how the culture of resistance that developed in working-class, lesbian bars and house parties contributed to shaping twentieth-century gay and lesbian consciousness and politics. Our approach is that of ethno-history: a combination of the methodology of ethnography—the intensive study of the culture and identity of a single community—with history—the analysis of the forces that shaped how that community changed over time, using as our primary sources oral histories of Buffalo lesbians.

We have chosen to focus on working-class lesbians because we view them as having had a unique role in the formation of the homophile and gay liberation movements. Like virtually every other aspect of modern social relations, lesbian social life and culture differed according to social class. Lesbians who were independently wealthy and not dependent on society’s approval for making a living and a home could risk being open about their lesbianism with few material consequences. But this privilege also meant that their ways of living had limited benefits for the majority of working lesbians. Middle-class lesbians who held teaching and other professional jobs had to be secretive about their identity because their jobs and status in life depended on their reputations as morally upstanding women. So, they, too, could not initiate the early effort to make lesbianism a visible and viable opportunity for women, nor develop a mass political movement that could change social conditions. By contrast, working-class lesbians pioneered ways of socializing together and creating intimate sexual relationships without losing the ability to earn a living. Who these working-class lesbians were and how they developed forms of community that had lasting influence on the emergence of the homophile, gay liberation, and lesbian feminist movements is central issues in this book.

The focus on community rather than the individual is based upon our assumption that community is key to the development of twentieth-century lesbian identity and consciousness. Even though lesbians or gay did not live in the same areas, or work at the same place, they formed communities that were primary in shaping lesbian and gay culture and individual lives by socializing together. In the 1950s, sociologists and psychologists already had come to realize that what many had taken as the idiosyncratic behavior of gays and lesbians was really manifestation of gay and lesbian culture formed in the context of bar communities. But the ideology characterizing gays and lesbians as isolated, abnormal individuals remains so dominant that the importance of community in twentieth-century working-class lesbian life has reached few people and has to be affirmed and explained regularly to new audiences.

For the purpose of this book, we define the Buffalo working-class lesbian community as that group of people who regularly frequented lesbian bars and open or semiopen house parties during the 1940s and 1950s. Such a definition raises problematic issues about boundaries. Were those who went to the bars once a year "members" of the community in the same way as those who went once a week? Was there a single national lesbian community, since some Buffalo groups regularly visited other cities and experienced a shared culture? Was there more than one community in Buffalo since it definitely had subcommunities with somewhat different cultures? Did African-American lesbians have more in common with African-American lesbians in Harlem in the 1950s than with European-American lesbians in Buffalo? We have no easy answers for such questions, but they are explored recurrently throughout the book.

By focusing on working-class lesbian communities that centered in bars and open house parties, we are highlighting the similarities between lesbians and gay men, since gay men and lesbians socialized together in such locales. Nevertheless, we decided to focus primarily on lesbians in order to ask questions from a lesbian point of view. Our aim is to understand the imperatives of lesbian life in the context of the oppression of homosexuals and of women. Later in the book, in the context of information on patterns of socializing and then again in the conclusion, we will consider the extent to which gay men and lesbians can be considered a single community.

**Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold** covers a crucial period in the development of
contributes to a more subtle understanding of the relationships between these two spheres.

The life stories of our narrators as they talked freely about sexuality led us to what should have been immediately obvious: Although securing public space was indeed important, it was strongly motivated by the need to find a setting for the formation of intimate relationships. By definition, this community was created to foster intimacy among its members and was therefore built on a dynamic interconnection between public socializing and personal intimacy. This study therefore encompasses social life in bars and house parties and sexual and emotional intimacy, and the interconnections between them. It asks such questions as: How does women's sexuality develop outside of the restraints of male power? What was the role of community socializing in the development of lesbian sexuality? How did lesbians balance an interest in sex and a desire for emotional closeness? What was the impact of community social life on the longevity of lesbian relationships?

All commentators on twentieth-century lesbian life have noted the prominence of butch-fem roles. Before the 1970s, their presence was unmistakable in all working-class lesbian communities: the butch projected the masculine image of her particular time period—at least regarding dress and mannerisms—and the fem, the feminine image; and almost all members were exclusively one or the other. Buffalo was no exception. As in most places, butch-fem roles not only shaped the lesbian image but also lesbian desire, constituting the base for a deeply satisfying erotic system. Beginning this research at a time when the modern feminist movement was challenging gender polarization and gender roles were generally declining in importance, we at first viewed butch-fem roles as peripheral to the growth and development of the community. Eventually we came to understand that these were at the core of the community's culture, consciousness, and identity. For many women, their identity was in fact butch or fem, rather than gay or lesbian. The unique project of this book, therefore, is to understand butch-fem culture from an insider's perspective.

Why should the opposition of masculine and feminine be woven into and become a fundamental principle of lesbian culture? Several scholars have addressed this question. Modern lesbian culture developed in the context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when elaborate hierarchical distinctions were made between the sexes and gender was a fundamental organizing principle of cultural life. In documenting the lives of women who "passed" as men, Jonathan Katz argues that, in the context of this nineteenth-century polarization of masculinity and femininity, one of the few ways for women to achieve independence in work and travel and to escape passivity was by assuming the male role. In a similar vein, Jeffrey Weeks holds that the adoption of male images by lesbians at the turn of the century broke through women's and lesbians' invisibility, a necessity if lesbians were to become part of public life. Expanding this approach, Esther
Newton situates the adoption of male imagery in the context of the New Woman’s search for an independent life, and delineates how male imagery helped to break through the nineteenth-century assumptions about women’s natural lack of sexual desire and to introduce overt sexuality into women’s relationships with one another."

We agree with these interpretations and modify them for the conditions of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. During this period, manipulation of the basic ingredient of patriarchy—the hierarchical distinction between male and female—continued to be an effective way for the working-class lesbian community to give public expression to its affirmation of women’s autonomy and women’s romantic and sexual interest in women. Butches defied convention by usurping male privilege in appearance and sexuality, and with their furs, out-sized society by creating a romantic and sexual unit within which women were not under male control. At a time when lesbian communities were developing solidarity and consciousness, but had not yet formed political groups, butch-fem roles were the key structure for organizing against heterosexual dominance. They were the central prepolitical form of resistance. From this perspective, butch-fem roles cannot be viewed simply as an imitation of heterosexual, sexist society. Although they derived in great part from heterosexual models, the roles also transformed those models and created an authentic lesbian lifestyle. Through roles, lesbians began to carve out a public world of their own and developed unique forms for women’s sexual love of women."

Like any responsible ethnography, this book aims to take the reader inside butch-fem culture and demonstrate its internal logic and multidimensional meanings. We will document the subtle ways that lesbian community life transformed heterosexual models, pondering the inevitable and fascinating confusions: What does it mean to eroticize gender difference in the absence of institutionalized male power? Is it possible to adopt extremely masculine characteristics and yet not want to be male? In addition, in writing this history, we consider the context of the severe oppression of women and homosexuals that generated and reproduced butch-fem communities, showing the way that butch-fem roles changed over time as part of lesbian resistance to oppression and their attempt to build a better life. We explore butch-fem culture as an historically specific form of rebellion that facilitated the building of communities, that supported women’s erotic interest in one another, and that contributed to women’s general struggle for entrance into the public sphere and for sexual autonomy.

In an ethnography, the precise use of language is a significant part of conveying a community’s culture. In this context the use of the term “lesbian” is problematic. We use the term “lesbian” to refer to all women in the twentieth century who pursued sexual relationships with other women. Narrators, however, rarely used the word “lesbian,” either to refer to themselves or to women like themselves. In the 1940s the terms used in the European-American community were “butch and fem,” a “butch and her girlfriend,” sometimes a “lesbian and her girlfriend.” Sometimes butches would refer to themselves as “homos” when trying to indicate the stigmatized position they held in society. Some people, not all, would use the term “gay girls” or “gay kids” to refer to either butch or fem, or both. In the 1950s, the European-American community still used “butch” and “fem,” however, slang terms became more common. Sometimes butches of the rough crowd were referred to as “diesel dykes” or “truck drivers.” They sometimes would refer to themselves as “queer” to indicate social stigma. In the African-American community “stud broad” and “stud and her lady” were common terms, although “butch” and “fem” were also used. Many used the phrase “my people” to indicate a partner. The term “ball dagger” was used by hostile straights as an insult, but was sometimes used by members of the African-American community to indicate toughness. For both communities the term “gay” was more prevalent in the 1950s than in the 1940s as the generic term for lesbians. Still, language usage was not consistent and a white leader in the 1950s says that she might have referred to lesbians as “weird people.” In attempting to use the terms appropriate to each group and each time period, our prose became very muddled and difficult to handle. We therefore have chosen to use the term “lesbian” as the generic to make our writing clearer. Inevitably, however, this leads to a distorted understanding of our narrators’ consciousness and renders lesbian identity too elemental. We try to account for this in chapter 9 when we discuss identity in detail. We ask the reader to keep this problem in mind as she/he progresses through the book.

PLACING BUFFALO WORKING-CLASS LESBIANS IN THE CONTEXT OF GAY AND WOMEN’S HISTORY

Writing working-class lesbian history is still a new undertaking that demands the intersection of gay and women’s history. Together these two fields have had a profound impact on the questions we asked and, therefore, on what we learned. In framing our study of Buffalo’s butch-fem community, we have been particularly influenced by gay history’s discovery that the homosexual person—one who defines herself as different primarily on the basis of sexual interest and who desires to congregate with others like herself—is a modern, Western phenomenon. This insight freed us to ask questions about the changing forms of identity and community, and how these were related to lesbian resistance. In addition, the insights of feminism have constructively informed the entire book; we have been influenced particularly, however, by having to rethink lesbian feminism’s marginalization of butch-fem communities in lesbian history. Together, the fields of gay and women’s history have complicated the definition of lesbianism by documenting the existence of four distinct kinds of erotic relationships among women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, a
number of individual women passed as men, some engaging in erotic relationships with women. These "passing women" lived separate from one another in the heterosexual world without the distinct identity and consciousness that comes with community. Second, many nineteenth-century, middle-class married women were unfaithful. These did not disrupt their widely held intense passionate friendships with women. Third, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle-class, unmarried women built powerful lives around communities of women defined by work, politics, or school. They too had intensely passionate but not consciously sexual relationships. They saw themselves as women outside of marriage, not as women who had a form of sexuality different from others; it was not primarily erotic interest in women around which they chose to come together.

Fourth, and finally, there were the women like those who are the center of this book, who socialized together because of their explicit erotic and sexual interest in other women. These communities mark the beginning of modern lesbian identity in other women. These communities mark the beginning of modern lesbian identity in other women. Communities that participated in these communities experienced themselves as different from those who participated in these communities experienced themselves as different from the others. This is a core part of their identity. The new gay history argues that this form of lesbian identity, which prevails now in contemporary Europe and America—and parallels gay male identity—is unique to this culture and time period. Homosexual behavior certainly existed in earlier times and in other cultures, but it was a discrete part of a person's life, not something around which cultures were constructed. In the twentieth century, however, an individual constructed his or her identity in a way that people came together, being lesbian or gay became a core identity around which people came together with others like themselves and built their lives.

There is some disagreement about when this modern gay and lesbian identity emerged, but most scholars place it in the early years of the twentieth century. There is also significant disagreement about the radical discontinuity implied by the view that modern lesbian and gay identity has little in common with that of the society. Modern lesbian and gay identity has little in common with that of the society. Nevertheless, other cultures or historical periods, for instance, Ancient Greece. Nevertheless, other cultures or historical periods, for instance, Ancient Greece. Nevertheless, other cultures or historical periods, for instance, Ancient Greece. Nevertheless, other cultures or historical periods, for instance, Ancient Greece. Nevertheless, other cultures or historical periods, for instance, Ancient Greece. Nevertheless, other cultures or historical periods, for instance, Ancient Greece. Nevertheless, other cultures or historical periods, for instance, Ancient Greece.

Buffalo's public lesbian community is one of many to form and flourish in the U.S. and Europe in the nineteenth century. A variety of factors contributed to the emergence of lesbian communities and a distinct lesbian identity at the turn of the century. First, the development of large industrial cities inhabited by migrants from both individuals and families offered the opportunity for gays and lesbians to congregate more or less anonymously. Second, the movement of women from the domestic sphere into the public realm in education, work, and politics allowed them to function somewhat independently of their families. The availability of jobs for women was particularly important because it gave them the opportunity to support themselves. Third, the increasing erotization of the public realm through the development of a consumer society, which promoted sexual pleasure and leisure to sell products, created a culture that separated sex from reproduction and valued the pursuit of sexual interests. The earliest manifestations of commercialized and eroticized leisure were late-nineteenth-century amusement parks where young working people met one another and socialized with sexual intentions.

By the early twentieth century, most high school students participated in a distinct youth culture that centered on the excitement of erotic tension. Fourth, intellectuals of this period made sex basic to their interpretive and artistic frameworks, as typified by the ideas of Freud that claim erotic interest as central to a person's being. This period was unquestionably one of change for emotional and erotic life. Historians of sexuality identify the turn of the century as a period of transition from the social structure of the eighteenth century, based on sexual self-control, to that of the twentieth century, based on sexual expression.

The first evidence for lesbians socializing together in public places comes from fiction and memoirs about Paris and New York City in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. By the turn of the century, lesbian communities were developing in all large metropolitan centers of Europe and America. Ample evidence indicates the existence of an upper-class, artistic lesbian community in Paris during this period. From the turn of the century through World War II, members of this Parisian community, many of whom were expatriate Americans, explored their lives and in their art what it meant to be women who were erotically interested in women, and began to develop a lesbian consciousness. To the best of our knowledge, this upper-class Parisian community had little contact with working-class lesbians of the time, about whom there is little documentation except for the passages in Colette's memoirs. Furthermore, at this stage of research, it appears that the ideas of this upper-class community had negligible impact on succeeding generations of middle- and working-class lesbians who read Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness but little else.

In the U.S. during the Harlem Renaissance—1920 to 1935—Black artists and working-class Black lesbians and gay men came together, joined sometimes by white lesbians and gay men, in communities that centered around buffet flats, house parties, speakeasies, drag balls, and entertainment clubs. Because of the
class mixture of people involved, some written sources in the form of novels and memoirs have survived, though more for men than for women. The prominence of gay and lesbian culture in Black culture during this period is indicated by their appearance in a number of blues songs. For instance, in "B.D. Women Blues" by Lucille Boggs, "B.D." refers to bull daggars. It is our guess that this powerful culture was formative for working-class lesbian culture for the rest of the century.

Precisely when lesbian communities formed outside of large, sophisticated cities is hard to determine, because they rarely appear in memoirs or in creative work. From a Salt Lake City woman's diary about her participation in a middle-class community during the 1920s and 1930s, we can safely deduce that some form of lesbian community existed in all regions of the U.S. by this time. By the 1940s and 1950s, working-class communities that formed around women's explicit sexual interest in other women existed in most sizable cities in the U.S. Interviews with comedians Pat Bond and Doris Payne have shown that lesbian bars in San Francisco and interviews with a Lesbian Herstory Archive about their strong community around the lesbian bar, Moody Garden, in the mid-1950s. In fact, the community is fragmentary, offering only glimpses of a more developed working-class lesbian community and culture.

The history of Buffalo working-class lesbians as portrayed in Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold is probably similar to that of other thriving, middle-sized U.S. industrial cities with large working-class populations, such as Minneapolis, St. Louis, Kansas City, and Cleveland, except for the fact that the racial/ethnic composition would vary according to region. In the first half of the twentieth century, Buffalo had all the characteristics that would permit the growth of a lesbian community. It was large enough to allow the anonymity necessary for lesbians to separate their social lives from work and family. In 1900, Buffalo had a population of 352,387, and it continued to grow for the next fifty years, peaking in 1950 at 480,000. As a major railroad hub for shipment of grain and manufactured goods on the Great Lakes, and as the terminus of the Erie Canal, Buffalo was a prosperous industrial city. Its industry provided lesbians with the jobs needed to support themselves outside of marriage. As an active player in the development of consumer capitalism, Buffalo was part of the trend toward commercialized and eroticized leisure and amusement that provided the base for a working-class lesbian cultural context. In addition, the African-American population in Buffalo increased sexual culture. In addition, the African-American population in Buffalo increased sexual culture. In addition, the African-American population in Buffalo increased sexual culture. In addition, the African-American population in Buffalo increased sexual culture. In addition, the African-American population in Buffalo increased sexual culture. In addition, the African-American population in Buffalo increased sexual culture. In addition, the African-American population in Buffalo increased sexual culture.
shape of lesbian feminism and on research about lesbian history, Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” and Lillian Faderman’s Surpassing the Love of Men. Both works privileged passionate and loving relationships over specifically sexual relationships in defining lesbian and explicitly separated lesbian history from gay-male history. Rich’s work is not intended to be an historical study; nevertheless, it proposes a framework for lesbian history. She establishes a “lesbian continuum” that consists of woman-identified resistance to patriarchal oppression throughout history. The lesbian transcends time periods and cultures in her common links to all women who have dared to affirm themselves as activists, warriors, or passionate friends. The place of sexuality in this resistance is not specified and the butch-fem lesbian communities of the twentieth century, because of their use of gender roles, are considered, at best, marginal to women’s long history of resistance to patriarchy. Thus, in this formative work for lesbian feminism, the only group of women in history willing to explicitly acknowledge their erotic interest in women are not central to the definition of lesbian.

Lillian Faderman’s book, an explicitly historical study, resonates with the themes of Rich. Faderman emphasizes the historical continuity of women’s passionate friendships in the middle and upper classes throughout history. She claims this hidden dimension of the lesbian past, which is particularly important in the late twentieth century, when the dominant culture admits little possibility of connection between women. At the same time, she gives minimal attention to the explicitly sexual lesbian communities of the turn of the century, treating their sexuality as problematic. She argues that the sexualizing of relationships between women was the result of the medical profession’s diagnosis of love between women as pathological. In her analysis, the nineteenth-century women’s movement’s achievement of some autonomy for women in the public world, coupled with the tradition of female passionate friendships, gave women the potential for self-sufficiency. Patriarchy responded to the severe threat by characterizing close ties between women as sexual and therefore suspect.

These works have been criticized for focusing on similarities in relationships between women, ignoring changing historical conditions that create different kinds of relationships, and for their valorizing of nonsexual relationships. For instance, Martha Vicinus shows that boarding-school “passionate friendships” in nineteenth-century England were not without strife and difficult power dynamics. Others have shown how the developments of urban life and the rise of consumer capitalism, combined with shifts in the organization of male supremacy, created new conditions that allowed for the development of explicitly gay-male and lesbian communities.

In the early 1980s a feminist sex-radical position reemerged that validated sex as a source of pleasure as well as danger for women and recognized butch-fem roles as an erotic system that fostered and shaped women’s desire. In the mid-1980s, the feminist movement became embroiled in a debate about the place and meaning of the erotic in women’s lives. Historical evidence about women’s erotic relationships was marshaled for each side. On the one hand, the prominence of women’s passionate friendships in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries corresponded nicely with and even buttressed a position that equates sexuality with maleness, perversion, and violence. On the other hand, the history of explicitly sexual, butch-fem communities validated the view that sexual expression has been a source of autonomy and pleasure for women. As feminists, studying the development of a women’s community formed around sexuality, we were influenced by and contributed to this debate concerning women’s erotic relationships.

We were identifying sexuality as an essential ingredient in lesbian life. In its final form, our study intentionally continues to invite a reconsideration of reductive judgments about butch-fem lesbian communities of the mid-century and revaluation of the place of sexuality in working-class women’s lives. We also aim to understand the ways in which the lesbian community is like that of gay men, particularly in regard to the place and expression of sexuality. The hostility of lesbian feminism to butch-fem communities has far-reaching and subtle implications for lesbian scholarship, including the understanding of lesbian agency in history. The stigma attached to working-class, butch-fem lesbians by most commentators has meant that there is not yet a strong tradition for understanding working-class lesbians as active forces in history. Even Lillian Faderman’s new work on lesbian history, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America, which provides an informative and comprehensive picture of the varieties of lesbian experience in the twentieth century, still treats the working-class subculture as passive and therefore tangential to developing lesbian consciousness and politics. Faderman views butch-fem roles, which were so central to working-class lesbian subculture, as originating with the sexologists and medical doctors of the turn of the century and as continuing due to lesbians’ unimpressed imitation of heterosexuality. She characterizes working-class lesbian social life primarily in terms of oppression.

They tolerated the smallest crumbs and the shabbiest trift in their desperation for a “place.” And even that was periodically taken away, whenever the majority community wanted to make a show of its high moral standards. But in their determination to establish some area, however minute, where they could be together as women and as lesbians, they were pioneers of a sort. They created a lesbian geography despite slim resources and particularly unsympathetic times.

Faderman’s version of lesbian history does not assign agency to lesbians unless they are involved in explicitly political institutions, and therefore excludes a good portion of working-class lesbians of this century. From our own perspective, this approach cannot explain how lesbian identity was formed in the twentieth century, and how the lesbian feminist and gay liberation movements so quickly became mass movements.
Scholarship on all oppressed people faces the challenge of assessing the degree to which they are actors in shaping their own history or mere victims of larger historical forces. This is particularly hard with lesbians and gay men. The dominant Western intellectual tradition, which has understood homosexuality as an individual’s illness, sin, or crime, has been challenged but not yet replaced by a strong counterconceptualization of the way that oppression relates to gays’ and lesbians’ creating a better life for themselves. In addition, not being born into the community with which they come to identify as adults, gays and lesbians share a culture based on survival and resistance that is not passed on from childhood. Each individual has to work out her own balance later in life, albeit with some help from the community. Furthermore, the fact that gays and lesbians have built their culture out of the symbols and meanings of the dominant society makes it difficult to distinguish which characteristics it has created and which have been forced upon them.

Joan Nestle, Andre Lorde, and Judy Grahn, all of whom related to some aspect of working-class lesbian communities in the 1950s, give us the beginnings of a new tradition, one that portrays working-class lesbians as creating lesbian culture and resisting oppression in the context of a severely oppressive environment. Our work builds on this tradition. The phrase “Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold” captures the duality that lies at the core of lesbian communities of the past—the toughness required to endure and struggle against severe and often violent homophobia, and the light and joy gained from the quest for the perfect love and the faith that a safe and respected place in the world was possible. Throughout the book, in chronicling the history of the Buffalo lesbian community, we attempt to balance this duality. Without a developed tradition for representing the character and quality of lesbian life, it has not been easy. We found ourselves swinging between the conventional roles of seeing lesbians as heroes bravely building their own lives and as suffering victims of extreme social hostility. Our narrators were key in pointing us toward a more complicated reality that encompassed both. The most common criticism we heard from narrators as they listened to or read our work was about the weight we gave to either suffering or happiness. After reading an early draft of the chapter on relationships, Vic, a European-American narrator commented:

“It sounds like it was pretty much the good side of the whole thing. It didn’t sound like there was as much on hard times or heartaches, or whatever you want to call it that really happened. I don’t know how you took your interviews, if you just took certain things out. It sounded like it really was a nice life to live, and it wasn’t. I don’t think it was. It wasn’t for me anyway. It didn’t tell all the hard times, really. Unless people didn’t talk about them.”

When we asked her what she meant—had we left out how bad people felt over breakups or how badly people treated one another—she replied, “Mostly how society treated you when you were out and things like that, not so much the people you were with.” Conversely, Jodi, an African-American narrator, commenting on an early draft of the chapter on social life in the 1950s, said that we didn’t sufficiently convey the good times and fun African-American lesbians had on an evening out. The bleakness born from oppression and the energy that emerges from resistance were at the core of their lives, and they wanted us to convey this as fully as possible.

CONSTRUCTING LESBIAN COMMUNITY HISTORY USING ORAL HISTORY

Documents on working-class community, culture, and identity are always difficult to find and this problem is compounded by the stigmatization of lesbians, which forces them to remain hidden or live at the periphery of society. Upper-class and/or artistic lesbians are likely to leave creative work, diaries, letters, or memoirs for posterity, while ordinary lesbians usually do not. Even if they do, their work is unlikely to enter the public realm to be found by historians. To address this situation, we and other lesbian and gay history projects have turned to oral history, an invaluable method for documenting the experience of the invisible; it allows the narrators to speak in their own voices of their lives, loves, and struggles.

In our research and writing, we experiment with constructing a detailed community history using oral-history narratives as the primary source. Oral history has been criticized as a basis for historical study, on the grounds that memory is too subjective and idiosyncratic. Whether the more conventional sources for historical and sociological studies—letters, newspaper accounts, court records, or observation—provide a sounder basis than rich oral narratives for the constructing of community history is in our minds a moot question. Although such sources do not introduce issues about the distortion of memory, they do raise other kinds of problems, such as the limited representation of community participants’ own views, or the lack of multiple perspectives.

We are writing at a time when most scholars are conscious of the contingent nature of all historical and anthropological studies. Built from limited data and shaped by the researchers’ perspectives, such studies need to be open to revision when new information appears. This is an atmosphere that liberates all sorts of possibilities for the researcher and the subjects of study. At one extreme we could argue, following the discourse theorists, that all history is memory, and that powerful representations of human life and society are not dependent on verifiable fact. We are uncomfortable with such a position, however. Although not believing that we can present the “objective truth” about society in history, we do assume that some interpretations reveal more about the past and about different cultures...
than others, and that research should try to achieve the best approximations of “reality.” We aim in research, analysis, and writing to find the appropriate balance between recognizing that our results are constructed—that they are shaped by our own culture’s questions, and our personal perspectives, as well as the consciousness and position of our narrators—while offering them as part of the historical record about the lesbian community of the 1940s and 1950s.

In all, we have collected oral histories from forty-five people, whom we call narrators. Ten of them entered the bar community in the 1930s and 1940s. Of these, nine were European-American and one African-American; seven were butch and three fem. Twenty-three of the narrators entered the public lesbian community in the 1950s. Of these, sixteen were European-American; five African-American, and two Native-American; nineteen were from the rough and tough crowd and three from the more upwardly mobile crowd; seventeen were butch and five fem. The remaining twelve did not participate in the public lesbian community of this time period but provided information about or perspectives on it. For instance, we interviewed a woman who participated in a more middle-class community during the 1930s, a man who knew some of the women in the bars of the 1940s, and one Hispanic woman who entered the bar in the mid-1960s.

The first women we interviewed were friends of the authors. Although these women consistently said things like, “I have nothing to say” or “My life isn’t very important,” they had a flair for storytelling, and invariably showed awareness of community structure and strategies for resisting oppression. After these initial oral histories, we began to map out whom we needed to interview for a full understanding of the lesbian community in the 1940s and 1950s. Some narrators made suggestions about key people and helped us locate them. The oral histories themselves also gave us clues. When we began, we assumed that we were studying a racially mixed community, but as we listened to the narrators we came to suspect that the public lesbian community during this period consisted of two sub-communities, Black and white, and that integration began to take place only in the middle 1950s, and did so without undermining the separate identity of each. Some Blacks and whites might have functioned in both, and some Black women might have participated more in the white community than in the Black, or vice versa. Nevertheless, two semiautonomous communities with distinct histories existed. Indian women socialized in either community, but usually in the white community, and we knew of no Hispanic or Asian American women in the pre-1960 Buffalo lesbian community.

To gain a full perspective on the working-class lesbian community, we tried to make sure that our narrators came from different racial/ethnic groups. We also looked for members of different social groups, so that we would have a variety of views on the community. Furthermore, we attempted to include the respected leaders.

In general, white women who came out in the 1950s were not difficult to contact through our network of friends. Those who were more obvious or more openly rebellious were quite easily convinced to participate in the project, while those who were more upwardly mobile, and therefore had more invested in camouflageing their lesbianism, were more hesitant to be interviewed. As a result, we have many more oral histories from the former group.

We also were easily able to make contact with and gain the cooperation of Indian and Black women who socialized with white women during the 1950s; we had great difficulty, however, in locating Black narrators who socialized primarily with other Black lesbians, even though we had introductions from young Black women, and from white women who had moved in the Black community at different periods. Two factors seem to account for our lack of success. First, we were unknown quantities in this community, and racism in the society at large made Black lesbians generally suspicious of our goals. They had no reason to trust our seriousness or want to help us. To what end were we picking their memories? Could we be trusted to present Black lesbian culture of the past in an acceptable manner? Second, the depressed economy in Buffalo aggravated the situation, as many Black women were unemployed and scrambling for survival, making it hard to give priority to a project like ours. Several Black women mentioned directly that they were unemployed, and they would speak to us another time when they were doing, and therefore feeling, better.

Finding narrators who were part of the white lesbian community in the 1940s also was extremely difficult, in the case of Black narrators it was nearly impossible. We attempted to contact members of a group that had stayed together for many years. Even with introductions from friends of friends, several people turned us down, claiming that they had nothing to say. We telephoned another woman monthly for about a year and a half and every month we put off with an excuse about how busy she was that month. It was ironic that we could not establish even minimal contact—not to mention trust—with members of our own society, while one of us (Liz) had spent two harmonious years with Native Americans in the rain forest of Colombia. Finally, we gave a copy of one of our papers documenting bar life to a younger woman who knew this older crowd, and asked if she could help us interview them in the project by sharing the paper with them at a party. This strategy worked. One woman was so appalled by the mistakes we had made and the things we had left out that she decided to “set us straight.” She agreed to come to an interview session and to bring a friend, who was in fact the woman we had been calling for a year and a half. They did indeed correct some significant errors. They also had such fun reminiscing about old times that, after they left us, they continued swapping stories at a local tavern, and thought of many more things to tell us in two subsequent sessions. Over the years we have been able to go back to them as further questions arose. They enjoyed the interviews but manifested the general reticence we had found among other women who had come out in the 1940s. They would not allow their interviews to be taped, and they did not actively introduce us to other women in their circle of friends. Even
though they were pioneers in the formation of lesbian community, the caution required of them to minimize the risk of exposure had continued to be a way of life forty years later. With persistence however, we were able to locate several more narrators for this period, some of whom felt comfortable using a tape recorder.

Finding fem narrators in these subcommunities was difficult, and therefore we have the stories of significantly fewer fems. Many fems of this period became butches, others went straight, and others claimed to be too shy to be interviewed. In the beginning, we had decided that we would only interview women who were still lesbians. At the time we didn’t realize how many fems we were excluding. Whether women who were no longer lesbian would have agreed to be interviewed is hard to know. One woman we were able to contact turned us down.

Although we did not participate in the community during the 1940s and 1950s, we do participate in the same general community in which our narrators now function today and our paths variably interconnect, depending on age, friendship groups, class, race, ethnicity, and culture. This apparently helped us in identifying narrators and convincing them to participate in the project, for groups with which we had the least direct contact were also the ones with which we had the least success in finding narrators.

Our contact with the community, however, also had its pitfalls. The main drawback to researching a community where we carried on our social lives was that we could not make a clear separation between work and personal life, placing tremendous demands on our moral character to meet high ethical standards for research. We felt—rightly or wrongly—the need to be models of respectability and sensitivity in order to convince people that we were trustworthy and that the project was worthy of their participation. We also had to manage our personal lives carefully so that we did not inadvertently become involved in community tensions and rifts, thereby limiting our access to those who might help us find narrators. It was also essential to guard against using the research to personal advantage in our social lives. As we collected oral histories, moreover, we came to know a great deal about the lives of members of the community; yet because we had guaranteed our narrators confidentiality, we had to develop a discipline for digesting information without using it or sharing it directly in our lives. And when narrators who were not held to our standards as researchers might use an interview to vent a grievance or manipulate one of us, we had to learn to ignore it.

Research in the lesbian community—finding narrators, archiving oral histories, or writing a book—raises immediately the problem of protecting the narrators’ identities. We had to be extremely careful in order for people to feel comfortable about introducing us to others and supporting our work. But also for our own peace of mind. Although the lesbian and gay movements of the past fifteen years have achieved a less repressive social climate, the recent rise of right-wing social movements and their homophobic positions, in the context of knowledge about the persecution of gays and lesbians during the 1950s, convinced us that we did not want a file with the names of our narrators.49

We not only had to worry about protecting the identities of narrators, but also the identities of those people who were mentioned in the interviews. Many narrators considered this to be of the utmost importance, for they felt that they could make decisions for themselves but not for others. The extraordinary sensitivity our narrators had for protecting others, rarely giving the name of someone who they had not decided in advance it was all right to mention, educated us about how important this issue was in their lives. We set up a system of collecting dates and locations in interviews and having narrators prefer not to recall the names of others on tape and agreed to erase the names that came up inadvertently, as a result we often had trouble analyzing community relations—tracing friendships and relationships—because people’s identities were not immediately apparent.

In the writing of the book we have been scrupulous about concealing the identities of narrators and their friends. Although the statements by narrators offer insight into life experience, character, and philosophy of particular people, we have been careful to subtly disguise individuals. We use pseudonyms for everybody. In addition, all identifying features of a particular person—distinctive physical features, city of birth or place of work, or activism in a particular organization—have been altered. Even nicknames have been recast. Furthermore, some faces in the photographs have been modified to camouflage identity.50 We do not think that this undermines the validity of our study because it is a community history and therefore not dependent on the exact details of individual lives.

Knowing from the beginning that we wanted to write a community history based on oral histories meant we had to be sure that narrators gave us comparable information about the details of their lives in the community. We were faced with the challenge of asking detailed questions that would help us understand the social and cultural life of the Buffalo lesbian community without destroying the narrator’s control over the direction of her story. In order to help the narrators take control of their own story, a necessity in oral history, and to give us some understanding of her perspective on lesbian life, we opened our interviews with some variations on the following three questions: 1) What is important for us to cover in a book about the lesbian community of the past and lesbian lives? 2) What do you see as turning points in the history of the lesbian community? 3) What do you see as the
turning points in your own life? The first question allowed a narrator to say what was on her mind, and let her know that we were interested in what she had to say. The next two questions helped us and the narrators to think historically.

Beyond this opening, we did not have a set interview format. The interviews were organized by a combination of the flow of our narrators' memories, the periods a narrator had delineated in her discussion of turning points, and the topics that concerned us. For instance, one narrator identified her own turning points as life in the Army, life as a bar dyke, life in and out of mental hospitals, and life as a participant in an active gay organization. (Her language of course was more specific, naming the mental hospitals and the gay organization, but we have generalized these as we do throughout the book to make her less identifiable.) We then used these segments to provide an historical framework for the interview. If people could not identify turning points, time periods were based on the narrator's progression of lovers or on the obvious historical developments in the gay and lesbian community.

Topics we expected to cover in the course of an interview included: bars, relationships, socializing, coming out, family, mothering, aging, butch-fem roles, racism, work, gay men, the gay and women's liberation movements, oppression and resistance, sexuality, and how these changed over time. Early in our work we had what we called "hunch sessions" on each topic to determine why a topic might be important to our study, what other people had said about it, and our own hunches about what we expected to find and why. From these we were able to develop a thorough list of questions that we needed answered. For instance, our hunch sessions on bars generated the following kinds of questions: How does a bar become a gay bar? Recalling the first gay bar you entered, what was the physical locale? What kind of music was played? Could lesbians dance together? Was the bartender male or female? Was the owner male or female? Did straight people frequent the bar? Did gay men and lesbians frequent the same bars? How did you get to meet someone who looked interesting at the bar? For each topic we were interested in how narrators learned about appropriate behavior. On the topic of sexuality, for example, our hunch session generated the following kinds of questions: How did you learn about making love to a woman, and was the way you learned common in the community? How did you learn the language that surrounds lovemaking? Have you ever passed this information on to another lesbian?

Despite the specificity of these questions, they were only generated to help us think creatively about the issues likely to arise during an interview. Each of us reworked these questions as an interview progressed in order to make them appropriate to the individual narrator, the flow of her own memory, and the topics she considered important. Before an interview, we refreshed our memories on these topics; then we listened carefully to the narrator, developing particular questions from what she said. Only when there was a definite lull in an interview and a narrator had finished what she wanted to say might we interject one of our own questions.

Ideally, we had more than one interview session with a narrator. Since memory often improves with use, we encouraged our narrator to prepare between interviews, and often at a second interview people would say, "I remembered something I haven't thought about for years." We also encouraged narrators to bring photos and other souvenirs, since physical memorabilia often serve as points of departure for discussion. In addition, we would come prepared with as much specific information as possible about the events a narrator mentioned, because specific names of places and facts about events often stimulate memory.

Oral history as a method involves a personal relationship between the narrator and the researcher; in any successful interview there is a bond of information and understanding that can be very rewarding for both parties. The narrator has a chance to reflect fully on her life with the interested attention of another person. The interviewer has the benefit of learning valuable and exciting information that may be relevant to her own life. The nature of the lesbian community meant that the memories shared were often very painful, because narrators were public about their lesbianism at a time when this was a very difficult thing to do, and they suffered severe consequences. At first we considered not encouraging people to explore these painful memories, but then came to wonder who was really protected by such a move. One of the values of doing an oral history for a narrator might be the chance to air some of these painful experiences. Although some narrators would not talk about aspects of their past, precisely because they were too painful, others told emotional stories about being thrown out of school in their youth and ending up in reformatories, about losing jobs, or about brutal beatings, or they reflected on the loneliness and inhumanity of past treatment. We had to learn that being good listeners was an adequate and respectful response.

Narrators' memories are colorful, illuminating, and very moving. Our purpose, however, was not only to collect individual life stories, but also to use these as a basis for constructing the social structure and culture of the lesbian community. To create from individual memories a useful analysis of this community's social life and history presented a difficult challenge. The method we developed was slow and painstaking. We treated each oral history as an historical document, taking into account each narrator's particular social position and how that might affect her memories. We also considered how our own point of view influenced the kind of information we received and the way in which we interpreted a narrator's story. We juxtaposed all interviews with one another to identify patterns and contradictions and when possible checked our developing understanding with other sources, such as newspaper accounts, legal cases, and labor statistics. From this close work with the data, we reexamined our original hunches and developed new or more precise interpretive frameworks. Some analytical perspectives were unquestionably better than others, in that they illuminated more of the data at
hand, explaining cultural patterns, contradictions, and seemingly unrelated facts. They let the data sing, revealing deep cultural resonances and elegant themes.  

As mentioned earlier, we first focused on understanding and documenting lesbian bar life. From the many vibrant and humorous stories about adventures in bars and from the mountains of seemingly unrelated detail about how women spent their time, we began to identify a chronology of bars and to recognize distinctive social mores and forms of lesbian consciousness that were associated with different time periods and even with different bars. We checked and supplemented our analysis by research into newspaper accounts of bar raids and closings and actions of the State Liquor Authority. Contradictions frequently emerged in narrators' accounts of bar life, but, as we pursued them, we found they were rarely due to idiosyncratic or faulty memory, but to the complexity of bar life. Often the differences could be resolved by taking into account the different social positions of narrators or the kinds of questions we had asked to elicit the information we received. If conflicting views persisted, we tried to return to the narrators for clarification. Some contradictions existed in the community at the time. For instance, narrators consistently told us about the joys of bar life as well as the pain. We came to understand that both were part of the real experience of bar life during the 1940s and 1950s.

Using memories to trace the evolution of sexual norms and expression is, at least superficially, more problematic than using them to document social life in bars. There are no public events or institutions to which the memories can be linked. Thus, when a narrator talks about butch-fem sexuality in the 1940s, we must bear in mind that her view and her practice of butch-fem sexuality was likely to have been modified in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s and that this might color her memories. By contrast, when a narrator talks about bars in the 1940s, even though social life in bars might have changed over the last forty years, she can tie her memories to a concrete place that existed during a specific time period. Although not enough is known about historical memory to evaluate fully information derived from these different types of reminiscences, the vividness of narrators' stories suggests that the potential of oral history to generate full documents about women's sexuality might be especially rich in the lesbian community.

Since one of the reasons for building public communities was to facilitate the pursuit of intimate relationships, lesbian memories about sexual ideals and experiences were not separated from more public or social activities. In addition, when the oppression of homosexuals marked most lesbians' lives with fear of punishment and lack of acceptance, sexuality was one of the few areas in which many lesbians found satisfaction and pleasure. This was reinforced by the fact that for lesbians, sexuality was not directly linked with the pain and danger of women's responsibility for childbearing and their economic dependence on men. Memories of sexual experience, therefore, might be more positive and more easily shared. But these ideas are tentative. An understanding of the nature of memory about sexuality invites further research.

Memories about sexual or emotional life do present special problems with respect to precision about dates. We cannot identify specific years for changes in sexual and emotional life, such as when sex became a public topic of conversation in the Buffalo lesbian community or when role-appropriate sex became a community concern. We can talk only of trends within the framework of decades. In addition, we are unable to find supplementary material to verify and spark narrators' memories. There are no government documents or newspaper reports on lesbian sexuality. The best one can find are memoirs or fiction written about or by residents in other cities, and even these don't exist for participants in working-class communities of the 1940s.

Even more surprising to us than our success in learning about sexuality was our ability to trace changes in lesbian identity from narrators' life stories. Originally, we had not intended to address this issue, thinking that it was too psychological for this kind of community study. But the words of narrators drew us to it. They had no idea that they were being lesbian, being butch, being fem, had different meanings over time. Although we had always believed that sexuality was historically constructed, we had not understood how identity changed in the context of community formation. The fact that we could analyze such complex phenomena as what it meant to be lesbian, butch, or fem is a testimony to the fullness of narrators' life stories, and the generosity with which narrators shared their memories and perspectives on the world.

Our experience indicates that the number of people interviewed is critical to the success of our method, whether we are concerned with analyzing the history of bar life, emotional and sexual life, or identity. We feel that between five and ten narrators' stories need to be juxtaposed in order to develop an analysis that is not changed dramatically by each new story. At the present time, our analysis of the white lesbian community of the 1950s is based on oral histories from more than fifteen narrators, while that of the white community of the 1940s is based on seven narrators. We are therefore fairly confident in our analysis of the white lesbian community of this period. Unfortunately, we have only five narrators for the Black community of the 1950s and only one from that of the 1940s, and therefore we are somewhat tentative about our generalizations concerning the Black lesbian community. We do not have five fems for any subcommunity of a specific time period, so our analysis of the butch-fem dyad is likely to need further modification.

The most important check we have on our data and our analysis is from the narrators themselves. Several narrators have attended our public presentations and others have read written drafts of chapters. In both situations, narrators have been generous with their feedback. Their criticisms have ranged from the correction of
minor factual details to evaluation of our general framework, tone, and emphasis, all of which we have attempted to incorporate in this book. The narrators have been a powerful force pushing us to tell the most comprehensive and accurate story possible about their lives. For instance, when we presented a draft of chapter 8 to a Buffalo audience, some members of the audience said they were uncomfortable with the way we insisted on uncovering the negative aspect of lesbian relationships in the 1930s. One narrator, Bert, rose and said, "But this is oral history. This is our lives. This is the truth." She was followed by a second, Matty, "What do you want them to do—spend ten years working on a book, and then have it cover up the truth? That would be a waste of time."

We also have confirmation that our analysis has validity for the community beyond the lives of particular narrators. When presenting our work in other cities, we have frequently heard from women in the audience who participated in similar communities during this time period that we had captured their lives. After a reading from a draft of the chapter on relationships, a woman we had never seen before told us that she felt weird listening because she felt that the quotations were coming from her. Some of the experiences were exactly like her own, even down to the number of years she had been in a relationship and how long that relationship had been good before turning sour.

Although we are confident that our analysis of lesbian community history is revealing and reliable, we also recognize that it has definite limitations based on who agreed to be narrators. First of all, it is built on the accounts of those who survived this very rough way of life. Socializing publicly with other lesbians in the severe oppression of the 1940s and 1950s took its toll. Many did not make it, going back to the straight life, suffering illness, succumbing to alcohol, or committing suicide. Often someone would suggest a possible narrator and then say that she is not sober for long enough periods in the day to do an interview or her mind has been turned to mush by alcohol. Some chose never to enter the community in the first place because of its liabilities. Second, the analysis is biased toward lesbians who felt good about their contribution to the community and what the community gave them in return. We believe that those who were completely negative about the lesbian community would not think it was worthwhile discussing and would not want to give their time to such a project. When we asked one woman if she would share her memories on the lesbian community of the past, she quipped, "What community?" before turning us down. This woman was a close friend to a woman who did agree to be interviewed, but their paths in life gave them very different perspectives on their pasts. Our desire to understand how working-class communities were forerunners of gay liberation implicitly made a positive evaluation of these communities, leading us toward the survivors, those who felt good about their participation in this community. Third, our analysis privileges the views of white rough and rebellious butch lesbians, primarily because they were the easiest for us to contact, but also because of the cultural baggage we brought with us to begin the study. As a result, the stories of African-American lesbians and more upwardly mobile white lesbians play second and third fiddle—rather than emerge strongly on their own. A study that made either one of these other groups central would look somewhat different, as would one that was able to give the same weight to all three, as we had originally intended. Similarly, the story might have a different perspective if we had oral histories from an equal number of fems and butches.

In writing this community history, we experiment with interweaving the narrators' voices and our own. We give a primary place in the book to extended quotations from the oral-history narratives, which have been minimally edited. These convey the courage, dignity, and pain of individuals' lives, as well as the perspectives, concepts, language, and texture of lesbian community and culture, all of which have been rendered invisible in the historical record. Cumulatively, the stories comprise an oral tradition that helped lesbians hone their wit and strengthen their will for survival and change. We set these narratives in the present tense, e.g., "Matty remembers, "Things back then were horrible..." Although sometimes awkward, this format serves to remind the reader that the book is built from oral histories, that is, from narrators' contemporary memories about the past.

Our voice always stands separately, synthesizing the wisdom of all forty-five narrators as well as the written sources that exist. Despite our confidence in the analysis, out of respect for the narrators, and contemporary readers, we leave visible the seams by which the story is constructed. The end result aims to create for the reader a dialogue between the narrators' reflections and interpretations of their lives, and our own desire to find the best way to understand lesbian history.

The book is organized to encompass the two basic aspects of public community life that emerge repeatedly in narrators' memories: fighting, claiming, defending, and enjoying public space, and second, "finding the love of your life." It explores social life, butch-fem roles, intimate relationships, and identity as they were intertwined in this prepolitical era of lesbian resistance. Each chapter builds on the previous one so that intimate life is placed in the context of community life and butch-fem roles, revealing a multidimensional understanding of lesbian consciousness and identity and the forces that created them.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 explain the growth and development of lesbian community, culture, and consciousness in the bars and open house parties of the 1940s and 1950s. Chapter 2 documents the expansion and stabilization of lesbian culture during the 1940s, and conveys the risk and benefit to lesbians who left protected social lives to establish public communities. Chapter 3 examines the emergence of lesbian pride during the 1950s, focusing on white and Black tough bar lesbians' efforts to expand their public presence and control their environment. Chapter 4 continues the discussion of the profound changes that occurred in lesbian social life during the 1950s, analyzing the desegregation of the bars and the emergence of class stratification.
The next two chapters explore butch-fem roles as both a code of personal behavior and a social imperative and speculate on why gender should be so central to the fabric of lesbian culture. Chapter 5 documents the elements of dress and mannerisms that composed the butch-fem image and analyzes visibility as a critical factor in the formation of community, identity, and consciousness. The meaning of gendered sexuality in the lesbian world is the subject of chapter 6.

Chapters 7 and 8 focus on the social forces shaping lesbian relationships. Chapter 7 identifies serial monogamy as a distinct pattern of lesbian relationships and analyzes the role of love both in bringing lesbians together and causing breakups. Chapter 8 documents the dynamics of committed relationships, attempting to reclaim them as a valuable part of the lesbian heritage. Our concern is to understand the underlying tension between the mutual cooperation of butch and fem and the tendency toward butch control.

Chapter 9 looks at the nature and content of lesbian identity, documenting the change from a gender-inversion construct to one of sexual attraction between women. Furthermore, we consider the different ways butch-fem communities and gay liberation draw the line between heterosexual and lesbian life. The Conclusion pulls together our complex narrative about the development of lesbian consciousness in communities based in bars and open house parties and its connection to the emergence of lesbian and gay politics. We also reflect on the implications of this narrative for gay-male history, for feminist understanding of butch-fem roles, and for the future of identity politics.
"I COULD HARDLY WAIT TO GET BACK TO THAT BAR":
LESBIAN BAR CULTURE IN THE
1930s AND 1940s

"To me there was nothing greater than a gay bar years ago."
—Vic

"Sure we had good times, but they were making the best of a bad situation."
—Little Gerry

In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, lesbians socialized in bars for relaxation and fun, just like many other Americans. But at the same time, bars (or, during prohibition, speakeasies) and public house parties were central to twentieth-century lesbian resistance. By finding ways to socialize together, individuals ended the crushing isolation of lesbian oppression and created the possibility for group consciousness and activity. In addition, by forming community in a public setting outside of the protected and restricted boundaries of their own living rooms, lesbians also began the struggle for public recognition and acceptance. The time lesbians and gays spent relaxing in bars was perhaps sweeter than for other Americans, because they were truly the only places that lesbians had to socialize; but it was also more dangerous, bringing lesbians into conflict with a hostile society—the law, family, and work. Thus, bar communities were not only the center of sociability and relaxation in the gay world, they were also a crucible for politics.

A small, though significant, body of writing exists on the complex nature of lesbian and gay bar life, but little, if any, considers changing forms of lesbian resistance. Due to the popularity of Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness, its depressing image of bars as seedy places where lesbians went to find solace for their individual afflictions has become embedded in the Western imagination. Lesbian pulp novels, as well as journalistic fiction of the 1950s and 1960s, were the first to convey the centrality of bars to lesbian life, portraying both their allure and their depressing limitations. In the 1960s, pioneering research in the social