

# "What Kind of Lesbians Are We Now? or, Sometimes We Feel Like We're Wearing

by Caitlin Fisher and  
Catharine Jones

*Les auteures parlent de la période où  
elles sont sorties du placard et de la  
complexité de  
l'existence lesbienne.*

*If I want to be a really  
good lesbian, I should  
do the homework.*

It's 1984. The woman beside me in bed, naked, beautiful, the only out feminist, out lesbian in my high school stares deeply into my eyes, takes my hand and tells me that she'd like to spend more time ... researching lesbian herstory. Herstory. I look at her oddly. Another feminist project to distract us from fucking. A language game. But I make a note: there is something like a lesbian past. If I want to be a really good lesbian, I should do the homework. I intend to be an A student. But I wasn't so sure about the feminism part.

I discovered *Lesbian Connection* magazine—free for lesbians. I gave the woman at the counter some money. Uh—huh. And in the back of the *Lesbian Connection* magazine was a listing of women, first name only—Deb, Gail, Pam—in cities all over the U.S. who promised to connect me to an unproblematically identifiable “lesbian nation.” I was inspired to get all three lesbian books held by my local library by looking under homosexual: Radcliffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, Judy Grahn's *Another Mother Tongue*, Jane Rule's *This is Not For You*.

*Never mind what your mother told  
you  
it's difficult to find the type of girl  
the world thinks best to keep away  
from.  
if only it could be so easy*

*a directory, perhaps  
listings in the yellow pages  
leading to someone who could show us  
exactly where Astray was*

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As part of a consciousness-raising exercise on homophobia we used to ask new Women's Centre volunteers to share with the group their first memories of the word lesbian. One woman spoke up without shyness or hesitation, unaware, maybe, of the effect her words might have. Her mum was a psychiatric nurse, she said. At the hospital where her mother worked, just west of Ottawa, there was a special, locked ward where parents brought their daughters to be cured of their lesbianism. This was 1987.

This story shook me deeply, then as well as now.

My coming out story, as I used to tell it, involved a direct and relatively uncomplicated journey from the isolation and silence of my high school years, to my discovery of, and acceptance into, a community of “womyn loving womyn” in university.

Missing from my story was six months of weekly sessions with a particularly odious psychiatrist. This man kept small packages of drugs on his desk, samples that drug companies had dropped off. Each week his fat little fingers would push a package across the desk. “What about these? Do you want to try them?” Each week I'd laugh at him and say “No. No thanks.”

This was the same year I took my first women's studies class and what I was learning there, and in the books I found in the Women's Centre library gave me the strength to resist.

The year ends: Meg Christian is playing softly on the tape deck and posters for International Women's Day, the fundraising dance for Sappho's Slugger's (Ottawa's lesbian

softball team) and my feminist peace collective's porn=rape=war campaign surround the bed where you'll find me curled up with Vita's love letters to Virginia. The year might have ended quite differently.

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Women's studies changed my life. I didn't go there intending to declare a major. I was just hoping to maybe get a date. But I found feminism, the books, the Left. I read de Beauvoir and Marx, *Feminism: the Essential Historical Writings*, *This Bridge Called My Back*, the SCUM Manifesto. And yes, the issues seemed to be my issues. And no, second-wave feminists didn't seem to me to be out of touch—just out of my reach. I thought the whole thing was amazing, hot ... even Shulamith Firestone. Even the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. Yes, even the statistics collected on women's double workload. I was blinded by passion.

Alone in my bedroom, I read *Off Our Backs*, flipped over, read *On Our Backs*, and didn't feel alone at all. Besides, as a bonus I knew that if I hung around the women's bookstore long enough the lesbians would come to get me.

I knew women had been to these places before ... had given me the gifts of these classrooms, these meeting places, this canon of books. Of course the canon came under scrutiny later, but then, as now, I felt a deep appreciation for the women who had done all this work. Of course, I expected all of these resources to be there. I grew up feeling entitled.

I was particularly grateful women had set up bars, even if I didn't know exactly where they were. Later I find out that in Ottawa the bar is located in the parking garage of a major mall. You enter through an unmarked door. You really do have to go underground. And when I finally find the bar, it's

## Flannel Shirts With Our Come-Fuck-Me Pumps”

like I’m stepping into a paperback novel, down those stairs, into that dim light, dartboards, pool tables ... right into the middle of lesbian herstory.

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*I felt my lesbianism to be both politically and morally blessed.*

I met Jay at a Toronto lesbian bar. I had travelled from Ottawa for a Joanne Loulan workshop—something on lesbian passion, healing, being a survivor.

At this point I was living a charmed life, relatively speaking. Maybe I was reading too much Adrienne Rich, but I felt my lesbianism to be both politically and morally blessed. In other words, I was having no sex.

My sexuality had been shaped by reading about the experiences of a generation of feminists for whom sexual liberation had held such great promise, and yet seemingly left them with so many disappointments—sexism on the Left, side effects of birth control, men’s use of pornography, and violence within and outside of families.

I had no vocabulary around sex, other than the vocabulary of victimization, the politics of penetration, sex being what men have done to us.

Jay changed all that.

But neither Jay nor feminism could give me the words to discuss where I found myself six months later, crouched at the bottom of a staircase, grabbing my books and clothes and stuffing them into plastic bags as Jay threw them down on me. And Jay leaning over me, moments later, whispering, smiling, “Be thankful that’s not you.”

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Later I do a Master’s thesis about

lesbians. Halfway through the writing, the lesbian nation dissolves in front of my eyes. There are no lesbians really, no women really, and my stupid thesis is full of capital letters in little quotation marks, impossible cute pommo slashes. The only lesbians remaining in the text are deeply ironic lesbians—but to tell you the truth they don’t do much for me. And it goes without saying that since there is no essential lesbian I can’t be one. Thing is, much as I loved jettisoning *The Essential Lesbian*, much as I loved the poststructuralist literature, much as I “get” the debate ... I still sleep with lesbians. I think. And as slippery as that term is, and as slippery as these women are, I haven’t been seriously wrong yet.

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1995. The pilgrimage to San Francisco.

I am in the kitchen of the youth hostel, sharing tea with a retired New Zealander. For over forty years he has run a pub in one of the southern provinces. He’s been married and divorced and raised two sons.

“What brings you here?” he asks.

“Well, ever since I came out...”

He looks puzzled.

“You know, came out as gay,” I continue, “I’ve wanted to come here. San Francisco is a mythical homeland to all sorts of gay folk.”

I tell him of one friend who has consulted an atlas and a compass and sleeps with her bed pointing to S.F. Only in San Francisco, I tell him, would 5000 angry queers storm city hall after the jury acquitted Harvey Milk’s assassin on the infamous “twinkie defense.” Only in San Francisco do hundreds of dykes on bikes lead the annual gay and lesbian pride parade. Only in San Francisco do you run the chance of bumping into Suzy Sexpert at Wegman’s.

He tells me I’m the only gay per-

son he has ever met. I tell him he would be surprised. What I don’t tell him is that by the time I reach what I always thought as lesbian Mecca, I have deconstructed my identity to such a point that within hours of arriving I embark on a very hot affair with a straight boy from London.

On the second day I pull the boy out of bed. “We have to go to the Castro—I came all this way.” We take the train down, I point out gay symbols and we hang out together cruising leather daddies well into the evening.

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Mid 1990s. I’m nostalgic for something that feels like the sisterhood I’ve read about in books. Do you ever get that feeling? I don’t want to reclaim the concept, but maybe, just maybe, it means I’m ready for potlucks again.

There was a time for many years where I’d sworn off ever participating in another potluck. Way too many bean salads, collectives from hell, fingers tasting like wallpaper paste from the posters we put up, always, it seems,

*I’m nostalgic for something that feels like the sisterhood I’ve read about in books.*

in the rain. It was all too bound up with exhaustion, disappointments, political failures, personal failures, older woman not understanding or showing up, women younger than me not caring, refusing to read that article I had so graciously photocopied for them, only coming to the dances and never to the demo. Ya, I was jealous.

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1996. Where do I stand today?  
My lover brings me a book of lesbian lists and all I can do is laugh. "You can't call Catherine the Great a lesbian," I say, "that's just bad history."

I work part-time as a reference librarian in a small town north of Toronto. I work mainly with high school students. And when they approach the desk I don't want to disappoint them by saying that sexuality is really just a social construct, you know. That we all deploy identities strategically. "Here," I want to say, "have you read Vita's love letters to Virginia?"

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## **PFLAG**

*Parents, Families and  
Friends of  
Lesbians and Gays*

**Metro Toronto Group**  
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Toronto, ON M5V 3A8  
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***Come out and join us  
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*Meetings on the first  
Wednesday of every  
month at 7:30 pm.*

*Glenview Presbyterian  
Church, lower lounge.*

*1 Glenview Avenue, Toronto.*

*On the third Friday of every  
month at 7:30 pm.*

*These meetings also  
involve a speaker.*

*St. Clements Anglican  
Church, Reception Room.  
59 Briar Hill, Toronto.*

## **LOIS FINE**

### **Nine Years**

Recently we've taken to costume  
and polaroid pictures to savour the moment

your body alive in red and satin charges your skin with lost  
electric impulse

I feel you like the first time I swung in behind you at a picnic  
bench outside the Chez Moi nine years ago when I kissed  
your neck and we both felt it like a thousand volts and later  
we talked about that moment for weeks and months and  
years still talk about it try to bring it back and then you put  
on that red thing with satin and clips and I am back there at  
the Chez

only now the volts are grounded through nine years of us

nine years of groceries and toilet paper and my underwear  
lying beside yours in a pile on the floor

nine years of staying up too late trying to know every inch of  
what you think about every inch of what you think

nine years of finding a word for you a way to introduce you  
to my great aunt Toby a name that would mean I love you  
and not sound like some business partner still searching for  
the word

wife doesn't do it either keep going back to lover because the  
word is ours we've always claimed it we as community

nine years of children other women's and ours and creating  
family refusing to be dysfunctional to yell at children more  
than at each other to order children to fetch for us to fetch  
our love to judge our fights refusing to claim their child-  
hood from them instead loving them only loving them  
knowing in the end with kids everyone just does their best  
even our parents trying to have a few laughs in it all

nine years of finding not touching not allowing not getting it  
just right not getting it at all

nine years of hands searching out bodies searching out places  
inside each other not hiding not running staying there  
looking in your eyes bodies inside each other show me who  
you are I won't go anywhere I'm right here touch me right  
here touch me

Lately we've taken to slow costume  
revealing ourselves  
ready now to see each other  
nine years later

*Lois Fine makes her home in Toronto but still prefers Montreal bagels. She is a hopeless romantic, a mother, a worrier, and a writer. She is proud to be in an almost nine year relationship with her lover Rachel Epstein.*